



# MACIA AREN'S BRIDE

*"...a historical romance reader's dream."  
—Affaire de Coeur*

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR  
DEBRA DIER

## Prologue

*Scotland, 1806*

Margaret Drummond wasn't sure when it had happened. She couldn't name the date, the specific time of year, or what she was wearing the first time it had smacked her squarely between the eyes. She suspected it had crept upon her slowly, like an illness, one that started with a little tickle in the throat and ended with every limb trembling like a willow in a gale. No she could not point to a date and say *that is the day it happened*, she only knew she was completely and irrevocably in love.

Although she realized fifteen might be a little young to marry, she could wait five months until her sixteenth birthday. It was a well-known fact the women in her family married young. There was no reason why Meg shouldn't plan for her own wedding. Except for one minor detail—the object of her affection hadn't actually pledged his love to her. In fact, she had every reason to believe Alec MacLaren might not even know he *was* in love with her. At least not yet.

Meg sat at the table in the family dining-room of Penross House, the Drummond ancestral home, contemplating ways she might catch Alec's interest. She slipped a chunk of roast beef under the table. Wallace, her Irish red setter, lifted his head from her foot and gently took the morsel from her fingertips. He finished with one swipe of his tongue, cleaning her fingers of the gravy. Instead of her napkin, Meg used the edge of the crisp white linen tablecloth to dry her fingers.

At the soft sound of a man clearing his throat, she glanced at her brother Rory, who sat beside her. He grinned and winked, silently telling her he knew what she was about. With a little gesture of his head he directed her attention to the foot of the table, where Joanna Drummond sat frowning at Meg.

Feeding Wallace from the table was not an acceptable practice at the Drummond table, at least not since her mother had taken the notion to transform Meg into a proper lady. Meg shrugged and Joanna rolled her eyes, a smile curving her lips. Although her first London Season was two years away, everyone knew it would take a great deal of time and effort to alter Meg. She had been allowed to run wild for far too long.

"I don't see why I must wait another four years until I'm one and twenty to purchase a commission." Her brother Colin sounded far too bold for a dinner table conversation. "Alec MacLaren has already done as much."

Meg's heart stuttered, bouncing painfully against the wall of her chest. She lowered her fork and looked across the dinner table to Colin. "Did you just say Alec purchased a commission?"

"Aye. He leaves tomorrow." Colin turned his head and directed his attention to their mother, apparently unaware of how he had just tipped the world on end.

Meg glanced at Rory and noticed he was watching Colin in that quiet, scholarly way he had of approaching every potential disaster. If you were facing a calamity, Rory was the man you wanted by your side, calculating a means to steer to safety using his prodigious brain.

With his dark chestnut brown hair, green eyes, and masterfully carved features, he was more handsome than Colin. Yet, where Rory was reserved, Colin was dashing in a wild untamed manner that demanded attention. Light from the two branched candelabras sitting in the middle of the table on either side of him glinted on Colin's golden hair and face, exposing the determined look in his brown eyes.

"I'm three weeks older than Alec," Colin said. "I see no reason why I cannot purchase a commission now."

Joanna lifted a fluted wine-glass, the crystal catching the glint of candlelight. Meg had never known her mother to appear without her thick chestnut hair in perfect order. Her clothes were always fashionable, her manners impeccable. Joanna was in fact every inch a perfect lady, a far cry from her awkward daughter. Even though Joanna often assured Meg she would one day learn all the intricacies of proper behavior, Meg had her doubts she would ever achieve the easy elegance that was so much a part of her mother.

After taking a sip of red wine Joanna spoke, her voice low and soft, colored with the accent of the English upper class. "I have no intention of discussing this at the dinner table, Colin."

Colin looked toward the other end of the table. "Father, I thought..."

"Enough Colin." Robert Drummond sent his son a look that clearly said: *not here, not now*.

Colin glanced down at his plate and clenched his jaw. "As you wish, sir."

Meg stared at Colin, a hundred questions fighting to be the first across her tongue. "Alec isn't going to the Peninsula. Is he?"

"Aye, he is." Colin glanced up, a look of disgust on his handsome face.

Colin closely resembled their father in looks and in temperament. Vikings inhabited part of their family tree. Both father and son were known for having a rather short fuse leading to a sizable cash of explosives. Since Meg had a similar affliction, she knew how difficult it could prove to remain calm when everything inside demanded an explosion.

"Light Dragoons, under Wellesley." Colin's voice dripped with what could only be described as poorly concealed

frustration. “He’ll see battle within a week. If I purchased a commission I could join him.”

“You would do better at Oxford, Colin.” Rory swirled the wine in his glass, holding his younger brother’s gaze.

Although the eldest Drummond sibling could ride, shoot, and tumble into the occasional scrape with the best of them, as well as display a rather fine temper when provoked, Rory had a much longer fuse than his younger siblings. At times it was hard to imagine he was less than two years Colin’s senior. Usually, Rory seemed years older than his reckless younger brother.

“Take a few years to explore the possibilities, see if the army is really what you want before you go slogging through one battlefield after another,” Rory said, in his deep quiet voice. “The army is a good way to meet an early death.”

“I’m not a scholar like you, Rory. I have no interest in spending my time sitting about listening to some old man spout the glories of ancient Rome.”

“There are other benefits,” Rory said. “You simply...”

*Battle within a week.* Meg’s head rang with the dreadful news, shutting out the discussion that ensued between her brothers, the debate about the benefits of education over the glory of battle.

*An early death.* An image rose in Meg’s mind, like a ghost rising on a foggy night—Alec lying broken and bloody on a distant battlefield. He could die and never know how she felt. Her chest ached with a horrible mingling of fear and anxiety. She had to see Alec. She had to tell him before it was too late.

\*\*\*

Meg had never been a shy girl. She had grown up with two older brothers who had always treated her as though she was the youngest *brother* in the family, at least until recently. Meg had spent the first thirteen years of her life running about in Colin’s old clothes, with her hair in braids, doing her best to keep up with her brothers and their friends, most notably Alec. Now she was obliged to wear riding habits and use a side saddle. The rules of proper behavior stated clearly ladies must live in tidy little boxes.

Meg had come to the ruins of the ancient fort perched on the cliffs above Loch Laren this morning dressed in a pretty dark green riding habit with one purpose in mind. Wallace moved his head, resting his chin on Meg’s foot. After running beside her horse for the few miles from Penross House, the four year old setter had flopped on his side at Meg’s feet and decided it was a good time for a nap.

The wind swept down from the mountains, blowing across the long, wide surface of Loch Laren, whipping the water into frothy waves before they crashed against the rocky shore. The wind cast the blended scents of the lake, heather, and meadow grass against her face. It tugged strands from her neat braid and flicked the wayward golden curls across her face.

She looked toward Alec’s home, wondering if he would come. A little more than a mile south, the walls of Dunleith Castle rose like a vision from an ancient legend, gray stones gilded under the sun. Dunleith suited Alec. She could imagine him a knight from a legend, bold and adventurous, chivalrous and charming, battling for his king, winning the hearts of ladies along his way.

The sound of hoof beats rose above the sound of the wind and the waves crashing against the shore below the cliffs. Meg turned as Alec rode toward the fort atop Fionn, his huge gray stallion, using the path that led to the back of the fort.

At the first sight of Alec, Meg’s heart did a slow tumble, knocking against her lungs, forcing all the breath from her chest. Although he wore breeches and a riding coat, he hadn’t bothered with a hat. The wind whipped through his thick hair, tousling the black waves into loose, wayward curls. He pulled up a few yards from the fort and dismounted, alighting from the saddle in one powerful motion. His horse wandered over to her mare, tossed his head and nickered softly, receiving a soft nicker in reply.

A smile curved his lips as Alec met her gaze, a wide boyish grin that made her wish she could capture that smile in a sketch. Although drawings of Alec filled the pages of her sketch book, she had never done justice to that smile. She doubted the most accomplished artist could ever do justice to Alec’s smile. And his eyes, those eyes were layered with so many shades of blue she defied an artist to find just the right blending of oil pastels to match his eyes.

Alec pressed his hand on the low remains of a wall near the back of the fort and vaulted over it, his booted feet making a soft thud on the stones as he landed. “You’ll looking bonnie fair, this morning.”

*Bonnie fair.* Oh my goodness, she could scarcely breathe. “I’m glad you came.”

“Your note sounded important.” Alec strode toward her in long, loose limbed strides.

He was tall, and built along the sleek lines of a born athlete. The dark gray wool of his coat stretched elegantly over the width of his broad shoulders before cutting away and exposing his slim waist and narrow hips. The buff colored leather of his breeches molded the strong lines and curves of his long legs, before plunging into gleaming black boots.

Wallace jumped up and ran to the young man. Alec paused, rubbing the dog’s head briskly, praising him in that deep, dark voice that could send a shiver over her skin. After greeting the dog, both males continued toward Meg,

Wallace staying close to Alec's leg as though the tall young man was his master.

When they drew near Meg, Wallace flopped down on the moss and rested his chin on his paws. Alec paused a respectable distance from Meg and smiled. She looked up into the staggering male beauty of his face and wondered if she would ever see him after today. When she thought of how reckless he was being she wanted to scream.

"Alec MacLaren, did a maggot crawl into your head?"

Alec grinned. "Colin told you about my commission."

Meg planted her hands on her hips. "They are fighting a war, Alec. And you just volunteered to march straight into the heart of it."

"I'm going to do my part. We cannot allow Napoleon to take over the world, now can we?" He gestured toward the mountains rising on three sides of the lake, where heather splashed pink and purple over rugged gray slopes. "Next you know he'll be marching straight into Stirling. Someone has to stop him."

Thick black lashes framed his incredible eyes. Excitement burned in those blue depths, the excitement of a young knight about to set off on a glorious quest. "You could be killed."

"I'm good with a sword and a pistol." He tucked a wayward lock of hair behind her ear, the soft brush of his gloved fingers sending a legion of tingles along her skin. "I can take care of myself."

"Colin said you were leaving today." Meg's stomach turned inward at the realization Alec would soon be gone. "Did you intend to say goodbye?"

"I'd never leave without saying goodbye to you, Meg." He chuckled her lightly beneath her chin. "I'll be over later this morning to say my farewell to you and your family."

"I don't want you to leave." Meg looked up at him and knew this might be her only chance to tell him a truth she could not keep locked in her heart. "I love you, Alec. I want to marry you."

By the look on his face, she might have just slapped him rather than declared her love for him. His eyes grew wide and his lips parted, yet it took several seconds before he spoke. "Meg, you're a wee bit young to be thinking of marriage."

"I'm fifteen, almost sixteen. Not so very young. And I know how I feel." She glanced down at the ground, feeling awkward and quite certain she was making a fool of herself. She stared at a clump of moss that had worked its way through the heart of a smooth stone cracking it into several pieces. "I know what I want."

Alec slipped his gloved fingers under her chin and coaxed her to meet his gaze, the soft leather warm against her skin. When she looked at him, he smiled in a way that left no room for awkward feelings on her part. He looked at her as though he cared for her, as though he understood everything that burned in her heart.

"You haven't had a London Season. When you do, men will trip over each other trying to dance with you. You'll have your pick of aristocrats and wealthy gentlemen, all wanting to win your hand. In two years, you won't even remember what I look like."

Did the man own a mirror? No woman could ever look upon his face and forget him. Carved with strong lines and angles, complete with a cleft in his chin, his face had been crafted with the sole purpose of pleasing the feminine eye. Even if he had not been so outrageously handsome, and he hadn't been dashing, he still would have been dear to her. Alec was kind and gentle, amusing and gallant in so many ways. Although *nice* sounded trite, outside of her brother Rory, Alec was the nicest man she knew.

Alec had always acted her champion, granted as though she were his little sister, but with affection just the same. He had even blackened the eye of one of his cousins when the English lout had insulted her last year.

"How can you imagine I would ever forget you? We've been friends all of my life."

"I'm not ready for marriage. And neither are you." Alec took her hand in a firm grip. Even though they both wore gloves, she felt it just the same, a spark of contact that sizzled through her. "We'll see how you feel in a few years, Meg. We'll see how you feel when I come home."

Would he come home? She couldn't imagine a world without Alec MacLaren. "I'll wait, Alec. Time won't change my heart. No matter how many years, I'll wait for you. I'll love you until the day I die."

He smiled, warm and indulgent, a smile meant to last her a lifetime. "You need to give yourself a chance in London. You need to be certain of your choice. Marriage is a lifetime."

"I am certain."

"It might be years before I'm home Meg. I need to make my own way in the world. And I'll not have you wasting away while I'm gone. You mean too much to me to ruin your chances in life. Do you hear?"

Meg knew her mind and her heart, no matter what he believed. "I'll wait for you."

He tilted his head, his gaze dipping to her lips. For one thrilling moment she imagined he might kiss her. She held her breath and waited, without any idea of what she should do if he kissed her. Purse her lips? Close her eyes? Hold her breath? Yet instead of kissing her lips, he pressed his lips to her brow, his breath feathering warmly against her skin.

"I better leave, my bonnie Meg."

“Stay safe, Alec.” She squeezed his hand, wanting to hold him here, knowing he would soon walk out of her life, possibly forever. “Please stay safe.”

“Now don’t you be worrying about me. I’ll be fine.” He winked as a mischievous smile curved his lips. “You enjoy your life, my bonnie Meg.”

Meg sought words that would make him stay, but knew it was futile. Nothing would change his mind. He turned to leave, but after a few steps he pivoted and walked back to her. Sunlight broke through the clouds overhead and shone full upon his face, revealing every nuance, as though giving her one glorious image to keep close to her heart. The look in his eyes whispered of a secret he wanted to share with her.

“Would you give me something, Meg? Something I can keep as a remembrance of you.”

She wished she had a miniature she could give him or a locket with a lock of her hair. Yet she hadn’t come prepared with anything to give him. “I can give it to you when you come to Penross House. Just tell me what you would like.”

“I would like this.” He tugged the end of her ribbon and slipped the emerald satin from her braid. After pressing his lips to the ribbon, he bowed as a knight might to his lady before a joust. “When I look at this I’ll think of you and remember home.”

Meg stood in the ancient fort and watched him walk away from her, fighting the urge to sit and weep until all the feeling drained from her. For as long as she could remember Alec had been a vital part of her life. And now she would have to face each day knowing he would no longer be here to share his smile, his laughter, all the little details of his life.

“Come back to me,” she whispered, watching Alec ride toward Dunleith Castle. “Please come back, Alec.”

\*\*\*

Eight months later, against their mother’s wishes, Meg’s brother Colin purchased a commission. Her parents argued, separated, came back together, and finally, after the truth of a horrible betrayal became known, the marriage fell into so many pieces no one could hope to put it back together again. When Joanna walked away from her husband, Meg lost the father she had always adored.

Meg and her mother left home and moved in with Joanna’s parents in England. Robert Drummond bought a commission and plunged into war, joining Colin and Alec in the Peninsula. Rory left Oxford to take control of the family estate. So many changes, in so many lives, in so little time. Through it all Meg often looked at the drawings in her sketch book and wished for Alec to come to her.

When she was seventeen Meg attended the London Season for the first time. At her presentation the Prince Regent took one look at her and declared in his rather bored, lisping drawl that Meg was a *diamond of the first water*. The next day the drawing room of her grandfather’s house was filled with gentlemen, each falling into one of two categories: those seeking an ornament to decorate their drawing rooms, or fortune hunters seeking a wealthy bride to fill their coffers. Not one gentleman seemed interested in learning more about the girl behind the mask.

At her first musicale Meg overheard two ladies discussing Lady Chadburne’s granddaughter. Mrs. Seymore—a lady so thin her hands looked like an Osprey’s feet—said in a shrill voice that carried through most of the room: *She is Scottish you know. I wouldn’t be surprised if she dances barefooted at the ball*. Apparently the *ton* expected Meg to be vulgar simply because she was Scottish. Meg pretended she hadn’t heard, even though she felt certain Mrs. Seymore had intended to inflict her judgement on her. Meg spent the rest of the musicale with a tight uncomfortable feeling in her stomach. What if she made a fool of herself at the ball her grandparents were giving for her?

When she walked into her grandfather’s ballroom for her first ball she thought: *This is what I imagine walking into the coliseum to meet the lions must have felt like*. After the ball, after hours of minding her every word and gesture, something broke inside of her. Meg sank to the floor of her bed chamber, crinkling her white silk gown. Sobs racked her, tears spilling down her cheeks doing further damage to the lovely gown. Wallace sat beside her on the floor and bumped her shoulder with his nose.

“I know I should be happy,” she said, swiping at the tears she couldn’t stem. Wallace tilted his head as though trying to understand her. “Mama said it was a victory. Apparently I’m a great success. But it was so overwhelming.”

All night everyone had watched her, hoping for her to make a mistake. It had taken so much care to do all the right things, and it was only the beginning. She had to maintain this elegant façade for the rest of her life.

Wallace rested his head on her shoulder, giving comfort in that peculiar way dogs have of connecting with their humans. She turned and hugged him, pressing her wet cheek into his warm velvety fur, breathing in his clean doggy scent, knowing he loved her no matter what, and somehow she felt better.

In that first Season Meg laid the first stones in the walls meant to protect her true self. Members of the *ton* saw an elegant, self-assured young woman who always behaved perfectly. Inside she felt small and fragile. If not for the friendship of Emily Maitland and Marisa Grantham—both sought after heiresses—she might have found no pleasure in her new life. But the girls had formed a bond that helped each of them endure the piercing scrutiny of the *haute ton*.

The walls surrounding Meg grew thicker and stronger with each passing year until she lived behind impenetrable castle walls, with only a few ever allowed to visit the girl locked inside. And all the while she wished on every star brave

enough to peek out from a polluted London sky for one Scottish gentleman to come back to her.

Her first Season Meg had been certain Alec MacLaren would march into a ballroom—it didn't matter which ballroom—and rescue her from all the boorish and cynical men paying her court, and the boorish equally cynical women looking for entertainment at her expense.

Her second Season she assured herself Alec would appear one day and take her riding in the park.

Her third Season she hoped for a morning call, just a visit, a word, a smile.

Her fourth Season she hoped for a glimpse of Alec on the street.

Somewhere around her fifth Season she realized Alec had no intention of ever marching into a ballroom, or taking her riding, or even paying her a call. Still, poor demented, besotted fool that she was, even in her seventh Season, more often than she cared to admit she still thought of Alec and hoped for that elusive happily ever after.

June 18, 1815 the world changed forever. It was several days later—after news of victory at Waterloo had been celebrated, after a member of the Ministry had visited with word of Colin's heroic death in battle—when Meg learned how much her world had truly changed.

Dressed in mourning for her brother, Meg stood by the window seat in her chamber in Mayfair, holding the morning paper. It was an elegant room appointed with pale green silk, richly carved mahogany furniture, and a thick Aubusson carpet, so far removed from a bloody battlefield Meg felt she stood on another planet.

She took a deep breath, filled with the scent of rose potpourri, hesitating a moment before she opened her copy of the *Morning Chronicle*. Every morning it was harder and harder to open the paper, knowing each morning included an ever growing list of the fallen. Yet she had to know.

The true cost of battle began beneath a brief paragraph highlighting the glory of Waterloo. Meg read through that long list of the dead, her chest tightening as she saw the names of young men she had met at a ball or party, all the while looking for one name and praying that name would not be included in that horrible registry. And then she saw it, *his* name and the assurance that Alec Douglas Patrick MacLaren, the youngest son of the late Earl of Dunleith, had died a heroic death on the field of Waterloo.

“Alec.”

Meg closed her eyes, conjuring the image of Alec as he had been that last day on the cliffs above Loch Laren—his vibrant smile touching his beautiful eyes with light. *We'll see how you feel in a few years, Meg. We'll see how you feel when I come home.*

Alec would never come home.

Meg felt the life drain from her, the strength seeping from her limbs. Light swirled in her eyes. She crumpled, her bottom hitting the floor so hard a tea cup shuddered against a saucer on a nearby pedestal table.

She sat in a puddle of black muslin, amid the intricate design of the thick wool carpet, staring sightlessly at the paper clenched in her hand, a wave of nausea gripping her. She swallowed several times, fighting back the bile rising in her throat. She wished Wallace was with her. She wished she could bury her face in his soft fur and allow his gentleness to comfort her. But Wallace was no more.

The tears came slowly, working their way past her shock, until her body shook with the sobs breaking over her in violent wave after wave. She tried to stem the tide of pain swelling within her, but found it beyond her ability.

“Alec,” she whispered, feeling as though she was breaking into pieces.

Even though he had been no more than memories these past nine years, he had also been hope. Now he was gone.



## Chapter One

London, 1815

Meg reminded herself of all the reasons she could not send Blandford scurrying from the room like the rodent he was. She sat on a sofa in the yellow drawing room of her grandmother's elegant town house on Curzon Street, trying to keep her expression from revealing her contempt for their visitor.

"I truly feared the man would never get it right." Wildon Fethersham, Viscount Blandford, picked a piece of lint from the sleeve of his black evening coat. "Is it too much to ask for a coat to fit perfectly?"

Meg had met the man several times when she was a girl and he had visited his uncle, the Earl of Dunleith. She had thought him disagreeable then—vain and spoiled—and she could honestly say time had not improved him.

She wondered if Blandford recalled the day he had once looked down his rather thin nose and proclaimed to everyone in the green drawing room of Dunleith Castle, that Meg *had all the grace of a toad*. True she had just bumped into the tea cart and sent a cup crashing to the floor, but it certainly wasn't polite to notice.

Ten years had not dimmed the memory of that day, not because of the humiliation, but for what had happened next. Before any of the fifteen guests—all children of the adults who were gathered in another drawing room of Dunleith Castle—could utter a word, Alec MacLaren had turned to his cousin Blandford, smiled and said: *apologize to the lady or I'll blacken your eye*. Blandford had simply glared at his cousin and declared: *You wouldn't dare*. In the next instant, Blandford was sitting on the floor, holding his face and wailing about telling his mother. Alec had winked at Meg. And somehow all the humiliation had vanished into a lovely warm feeling. Instead of lingering humiliation, the memory made her smile—all because of Alec. And in this she found yet another reason to detest time spent in Blandford's company—it made her think of Alec.

Lately she was doing her best to forget she had ever met Alec MacLaren. The man had been back from the continent for nearly a month, wounded but very much alive from all reports. And he still had not paid her a call, or sent her a note, beyond the very formal note he had sent her mother giving his condolences for the loss of Rory and Colin. It was definitely time to purge Alec MacLaren from her thoughts. Obviously he had managed to forget her.

She suspected Blandford didn't even remember the name of the girl he had insulted that day at Dunleith Castle. Even without her history with the man, she would have known the cut of his cloth. Her grandmother usually displayed remarkable insight when it came to unmasking the cleverest cads. Yet for some strange reason, recently Hermione had become quite enchanted with Blandford. It was a mystery, a horribly vexing mystery.

She glanced at her grandmother, who sat beside Joanna across from Meg on a matching sofa in the shape of a sphinx. Although Hermione seemed intent on every word uttered by Blandford, Joanna looked as though someone were pounding on her head with a rock, doing his best to split her skull. Her mother hadn't been well in weeks. Grief had taken a toll on Joanna, and Meg was at a loss as to how to help her mother.

Meg suppressed a sigh of relief when Blandford finally announced it was time he left. In her opinion that time had expired some five minutes *before* his arrival.

"I hope you might come for a ride through the park with me tomorrow." Blandford pressed his lips to the back of her gloved hand, lingering a moment longer than propriety allowed. It was all Meg could manage not to yank her hand free of his grasp. "I shall be desolate if you deny me the pleasure of your company."

Meg forced her lips into a smile. She had to admit, Blandford was certainly not unattractive, if one had a penchant for his particular type—just above medium height, slim, his light brown hair carefully cropped and coaxed into the latest fashion, his dark blue eyes heavily fringed with dark lashes. Meg, however, had never developed a taste for men who had the smooth, pretty looks of a pampered feline.

"I'm terribly sorry Lord Blandford, but I have a prior engagement." Meg neglected to mention the prior engagement was with the latest E.W. Austen novel, *The Country Miss*.

Blandford drew his pretty features into a look of complete despair. "I fear I shall wither, like a vine denied the sustenance of the sun if I must wait to see you until tomorrow at dinner, dear lady."

"Do be careful, Lord Blandford. You shall crush me with the weight of your flattery."

He smiled, obviously pleased with himself. No doubt the man was contemplating the ways he would spend her dowry. "I shall count the minutes until I see you again." He bid an elaborate farewell to each lady in turn before strutting from the drawing room.

Lady Hermione Chadburne released her breath on a long sigh in Blandford's wake. "Well, I must say Blandford certainly is persistent in his pursuit of you, my dear. Most gentlemen would have taken flight from your unwelcoming demeanor by now."

"Blandford is enthralled with the beauty of my dowry."

Hermione waved aside Meg's words. "Not all of the young men who have paid you court in the past seven years were after your dowry. Many have been quite eligible. And you have not found any of them worthy."

"Most of the eligible young men I know are either seeking a rich wife to fatten purses depleted through lives of



excess, pompous peers who want a suitable bride to extend their bloodlines, or boring puppies yapping at my heels.” Meg crinkled her nose at her grandmother. “I suspect Blandford might be all of them rolled into one.”

“With your attitude I’m afraid you shall end up a spinster.” Hermione turned to her daughter. “What do think, Joanna? Are you concerned Margaret will reject every suitor? Perhaps end her days a spinster?”

Joanna considered her words a moment before she spoke. “Margaret simply needs to meet the right gentleman.”

“And yet she rejects everyone.” Hermione fixed Meg in a steady stare. Although her expression remained serious, there was a glint in her eyes that gave Meg the impression her grandmother might be up to mischief. “In truth, I believe she has allowed the past to cloud any possible future she might have. I’m afraid your experience with marriage has left a bitter taste in your daughter’s mouth.”

Joanna sat straighter, her chin lifting slightly, the corners of her mouth tightening. Although three years shy of fifty, she looked years younger. Tall and slender, graceful in her movements, she had a few streaks of gray threaded through her dark chestnut brown hair. A few lines marred a face still beautiful enough to draw the attention of more than a few admiring gentlemen. Yet in the eight years since she had separated from her husband, Joanna had never once broken her vows to the man who had broken her heart.

“I’m certain she knows we mustn’t judge all men by the treachery of one. Isn’t that true, Margaret?”

When she thought of all the pain her father had caused Meg wanted to stand and stamp her feet, which was not allowed in the handbook of proper behavior. Instead she sat very still and kept her voice low. “I’m simply cautious that’s all.” After watching what she had imagined an ideal marriage die in betrayal, Meg examined each gentleman paying her court with a great deal of scrutiny. “At times I wonder if marriage is right for me.”

Joanna glanced at Meg, her green eyes wide. “Margaret, I applaud your decision in being careful with this important decision. But I would hope you don’t allow what happened to me spoil your future. You are far too young to consider becoming a spinster.”

Meg had in fact been dusting a place on the shelf the last few years. At her age most young ladies had either married or donned a cap. Fortunately she had good friends. Emily and Marisa still helped her navigate the treacherous terrain of the ballrooms of London. “If I met a man I wanted to live with for the rest of my life, I might change my mind about marriage.”

Meg thought of the young man who still managed to sneak into her thoughts when marriage was mentioned, and marriage had become a daily topic of conversation in the Chadburne residence. After years of waiting, she had finally come to the conclusion Alex was wrong for her. True she had come to that conclusion at least once a year for the past seven years. The fact she needed to remind herself every year was testament to the hold he still had on her. But she was working on the problem.

“I doubt I shall ever meet a man I wish to marry.” Meg could not give her mother and grandmother false hope. “And I can assure you, I will never marry a man who thinks more of my inheritance than he does of me. We become property when we marry, no better than a horse a husband can do with as he pleases. I cannot imagine ever giving a man I don’t trust implicitly that kind of power over me.”

“You will feel differently when you meet the right gentleman.” Joanna managed a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “This next Season I feel quite certain shall be the one you meet your match.”

It was not the first time her mother had that feeling. Meg suspected it was now often accompanied by severe dyspepsia. She looked from her mother to her grandmother, seeing the pity and concern lurking behind their eyes. She had not lived up to their expectations.

It left her with a strange unsettled feeling to know she would end her days a spinster, but she saw little hope for a different future. “You must not worry about me. Even if I don’t marry, I shall have a fine full life. I have friends and cousins. And I have both of you.”

Hermione and Joanna exchanged glances. Both ladies looked as though dyspepsia lurked nearby.

Meg’s chest tightened, knowing she disappointed them. “I’m certain neither of you would want me to marry simply because it’s expected of me. You both love me too much for that.”

“I hope you put this notion of spinsterhood behind you. Not all marriages end in disaster. Although I certainly understand your disinterest in Blandford, I’m certain you will find a gentleman who will suit you. I will not hear you speak of throwing away your life.” Joanna stood and pressed her hand to her brow. “Please excuse me. I have a dreadful headache.”

Meg watched her mother slowly walk from the room. Although Joanna had always possessed a strong constitution and an equally powerful temperament, the tragedies that had befallen their family over the past few weeks had slammed into her with the force of a horrible disease. She was not ill in any true sense, yet Joanna had lost any interest in life itself. Most days she spent lying in bed with the drapes drawn in her chamber. When she dressed and came to dinner it was a victory. Meg knew her mother could not continue in this fashion. Unfortunately, nothing Meg had tried had helped.

“One thing is true about Blandford,” Hermione said, after Joanna had left the room. “I’m sure you will agree, he

has a remarkable ability to make a few hours in his company seem a few decades. Long, boring decades.”

Meg inhaled deeply trying to ease the tension in her chest. “Grandmother, if you don’t enjoy Blandford’s company, I wonder why you seem determined to invite him to dinner with alarming regularity. Have you suddenly acquired a penchant for self-flagellation? Or, perhaps you’re laboring under the impression I like the man. In which case let me clear up that particular misconception by telling you how very much I loathe him.”

Hermione laughed as though enjoying a particularly salacious secret. “Of course you loathe the man. You are a girl of remarkable sense.”

Meg stared at her grandmother, mystified by her behavior. “Why in the world have you been encouraging him?”

“It’s quite simple my dear.” Hermione curved her hand over the arm of the matching sofa across from Meg, her fingers resting on the carved head of a sphinx. “I have a plan.”

Lady Hermione Chadburne had a passion for interior decoration. No room in the house escaped her touch, and no room in the house existed in the same space and time. Last year she had decided to transport the yellow drawing room from London to the Nile. Hieroglyphics covered the walls. Replicas of Egyptian thrones served as chairs. Each table was shaped like a small sarcophagus, complete with paintings of mummies. A pair of stuffed crocodiles guarded the entrance, beneath twin palm trees.

The red saloon was a slice of China, filled with porcelain jars, mandarins, and pagodas. They dined in a medieval banquet hall. The music room was ancient Rome. And in her bedroom, Hermione slept beneath a Turkish tent. Meg had managed to keep her grandmother from transforming her own bedchamber into a Greek temple.

Meg understood the passion for decorating was simply one of the ways her grandmother sought to indulge her creativity. Hermione wanted to travel the world, but had only managed to see a few counties in England and a small sliver of Scotland. Her grandmother had a flamboyant spirit desperate to take flight. Meg preferred a far more conventional approach to interior design and to life in general.

“A plan?” Meg studied her grandmother, uneasy with the glint in Hermione’s eyes. “Unless your plan involves driving me to Bedlam by forcing me to stay in his company for more than five minutes, I fail to see what you could possibly want with Blandford.”

“Oh, I believe Blandford shall serve us well.”

Meg clasped her hands in her lap, fighting the urge to pace the room. It was hardly appropriate behavior for a lady to pace like a caged animal, even when she wanted to scream for trying to hold her emotions under tight rein.

Although it had taken time, Meg had learned how to suppress her rather unfortunate propensity to yield to her fiery nature. Along with giving her personal tutoring, her mother had given her a book detailing all the proper ways to handle any situation. According to the *Mirror of Graces* by the anonymous Lady of Distinction, a proper lady must always keep her emotions under close rein. A proper lady must conceal her true nature. Above all else, a proper lady must never throttle anyone, no matter how tempted she might be—Meg had written this several times in the margins of her book.

At times it took every ounce of will to maintain her carefully fashioned façade. But maintain it she would. She would not disappoint her mother. Joanna Drummond had suffered far too many disappointments in life.

“I have been trying to figure out a means to force your mother out of her melancholy,” Hermione said. “I believe I have found a way. Blandford is the key to my plan, and you gave me the idea.”

“How is Blandford key to anything? And how in the world did I give you any idea concerning Blandford? Except perhaps the idea of boxing his ears. I admit I often entertain that particular idea when forced to endure his company longer than five minutes. At times it is all I can do to keep my hands from rising up and,” Meg clapped her hands in front of her, “doing him proper justice.”

Hermione glanced around the room as though looking for spies, when she spoke she kept her voice low. “I intend to bring your parents back together and Blandford is going to help.”

“Why would you imagine Mother would suddenly recover if you were to thrust Robert Drummond back into her life? You do know they hardly spoke when he was here a fortnight ago.”

Hermione waved one elegant hand as though ridding herself of a pesky fly. Tall, with a figure that betrayed her love of eclairs, her chestnut brown hair streaked with white, and finely etched features, Hermione looked a plumper, faded version of her daughter. “Joanna was only ever truly happy when she was with your father. She loved him deeply, and he adored her. I never saw two people more devoted to one another.”

Meg glanced down at her hands, fighting the memories that rose like vultures determined to feed on her vitals. “They had a great distance to fall. Perhaps it’s what made things so horrible at the end, the betrayal even more shocking.”

“I can only imagine what Robert must have felt when Joanna left him that first time.” Hermione pursed her lips. “She had been here less than a day when your father stormed in, insisting she return home with him. At one point I felt quite certain he was going to toss her over his shoulder and carry her out of the house.” She sighed heavily. “I wish he had.”

Meg had often wondered what might have happened if her mother had returned home that day her father had come to London to fetch his wife. Still, she felt it disloyal to doubt her mother's decisions, especially when she had good reason to leave. "No one should be treated like property, Grandmother. If Father had asked, if he had apologized for treating her with so little regard, she would have gone home. But he demanded it of her."

"Your father was never a man to plead or cajole. But it didn't mean he wasn't desperate for her to come home. I told Joanna as much, but she was every bit as stubborn as your father. She married a lion and wanted him to behave as a lamb. You must own they were both at fault."

"Perhaps." Meg fought to remain calm in the face of the memories. "Still, I cannot see how they will ever resolve their differences."

Hermione stood and closed the distance between them, black silk rustling with her movement. She sat beside Meg, bringing with her the soft scent of flowers—delicate lilies mingling with sweet myrtle. Hermione rested her hand over Meg's tightly clenched hands. "I believe they should be together. If Drummond hadn't purchased a commission and marched off to war, I would have found a way to bring them together a long time ago."

"I'm not certain Mother could ever trust him again. How do you make a success of marriage if you cannot trust the man you married?"

"Marriage is seldom an ideal, Meg. It's how we handle adversity that can make a marriage stronger or destroy it altogether." Hermione looked up at the ceiling, as though looking for answers amid the scroll work. "I believe Joanna and your father need a chance to make things right, especially after suffering the loss of both Rory and Colin. I honestly don't know what else to try."

"How does Blandford play a role in your plan?"

"When Robert visited, you allowed him to believe you might marry an Englishman to spite him. I believe you even mentioned the possibility of an elopement."

Meg cringed at the memory. When her father had come to see her nearly a fortnight ago, she had wanted desperately to believe his sudden attention was due to the fact he missed her, but she knew better than to believe in miracles.

With the death of her brothers she was now her father's heir. He wanted her to return to Scotland, not because he missed her. No, his motive had nothing to do with affection. He wanted to preserve his precious land, arrange a *proper* marriage for her, and ensure his legacy. His daughter was merely a means to an end.

"I'm not proud of my behavior. I allowed my emotions to rule me that day. Father has come to see me six times in eight years. And now he believes he has the right to tell me precisely what I shall do with the rest of my life. He told me he would decide a proper match for me. He *ordered* me to come back to Penross House. He treated me as though I were a soldier under his command."

"Yes dear. He has all the subtlety of a Viking raider. But, you are his daughter and he has always loved you." Hermione raised her hand, cutting off any protest Meg might make. "Now that you are his heir, he is quite determined to see you properly settled. And rightfully so, I might say."

Meg tried to conceal the hurt that still nagged her when she thought of her father. "He only cares because I'm his heir."

"You are mistaken in that belief, but I know no one can convince you otherwise. Still, I have given him reason to be concerned." Hermione drew circles with her fingertip on the brow of the sphinx adorning the arm of the sofa. "I might have allowed Robert to believe you would soon accept Blandford's offer of marriage."

Meg struggled to make sense of her words. "You told Father I plan to marry Blandford?"

Hermione nodded, looking pleased. "I sent him a letter."

"I'm not sure why you would want Father to believe I would accept Blandford. Unless of course you would like him to believe I was dropped on my head at birth. But since he was present that day, he knows otherwise. Father would never believe I would do anything so foolish as to marry that arrogant prig."

"If Drummond has any doubt, he will act." Hermione brushed her finger over the corner of her smug smile, obviously content with own cleverness. "I expect Drummond will pay us a visit any day now to tell you in no uncertain terms that he does not give his consent to the marriage. And when he does, I will make certain to thrust your mother squarely into his path."

"And they will proceed to ignore each other." Meg couldn't shake the feeling her grandmother had just poked a hornet's nest. "Or, they could start arguing. Perhaps there might even be a bit of crockery smashed against a wall. Mother threw a vase before we left home. Of course she told me I must never do anything so violent. It isn't proper behavior. Apparently she was momentarily possessed by the ghost of a long dead Drummond ancestor. She suspected it might have been father's Great Aunt Elspeth, who once broke a tureen over her husband's head at dinner, while it was full of giblet soup. Mother thought it was the only possible answer for her sudden bout of apoplexy."

Hermione nodded, her serious look spoiled by the glint in her eyes. "I shall make certain to put the Ming vases out of range."

“Grandmother, this has disaster written all over it.”

“Joanna cannot continue in this fashion. We need something drastic to draw her out of her melancholy. And I could scarcely think of anything more drastic than forcing Robert and Joanna to face their difficulties.”

“It’s a little like inviting Napoleon and Wellington to tea. I suspect the result could be every bit as bloody as Waterloo.”

“Your parents are both grieving. They need each other. And Joanna needs something to bring her back to life.”

“I know she does.” Meg knew the situation stood on the brink of desperation. “But, I cannot imagine Father helping her.”

“She needs a diversion, a monumental shock to drag her out of her despair.” Hermione punctuated her words with quick jabs of her fist, as though she were knocking on a door and demanded someone answer immediately. “I need your help, darling. I need you to play your part. I need you to allow your father to believe you intend to marry Blandford. It’s the only way we have a chance of succeeding.”

Meg recoiled at the thought of allowing anyone to believe she had an interest in Blandford. “I would rather plunge into the filth of the Thames and drown beside a cow carcass than marry that man.”

“A reasonable reaction, but I need you to give me your word that you will keep my secret. We must give my plan a chance to succeed. Will you help me?”

“Grandmother, I cannot give Blandford the impression I will accept his offer. As much as I dislike him, it would be most dishonorable of me to lead him to believe I have an interest in him.”

“Of course, darling. But, when your father comes you can tell him you are considering the possibility. And should anyone else ask you about it, you can be quite vague. I’m not asking you to declare your intent to marry Blandford, but there is no reason to tell anyone how much you loathe the man. Not the slightest mention of cow carcasses. Will you do this for me? Will you give us a chance to help your mother?”

“Although I doubt it shall succeed, I agree that we must try something.” Meg clasped her grandmother’s hand. “You have my word. I will help in any way I can.”

“I knew I could rely upon you. You have never disappointed me in anything. Believe me when I say we won’t have long to wait. I feel certain your father is getting quite desperate. I believe he shall soon pay us a visit.”

“What makes you think Father is becoming desperate?”

Hermione flicked open her fan and swished it slowly below her chin, fluttering the chestnut curls carefully crimped around her face. “He sent a young man to see you this afternoon. Perhaps you remember him, Alec MacLaren, the new Earl of Dunleith.”

“Alec MacLaren.” Meg felt as though the floor had just opened up and she was falling. It took all of her will to keep her voice calm as she spoke. “Alec MacLaren was here this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he was here to see me?”

“You were reading to Joanna at the time. I meant to tell you, but I never had a chance. You do understand why I couldn’t invite him to stay and visit with you. You would have spoiled everything. It’s important for your father to believe you will accept Blandford, and even more important that he handle this matter personally.”

Hermione studied her a moment, a curious look in her eyes. “I believe you and Lord Dunleith were close when you were children. You once had a *tendrè* for him, did you not?”

“I suffered the infatuation of a child.” Meg rubbed the skin beneath her right ear. One would think nine years sufficient time to heal wounds from her foolish foray into romance. She needed to try harder. Perhaps ten would do the trick. “He didn’t share my sentiments.”

“Well, I can certainly see why he caught your interest. He is one of the most handsome men I have ever been fortunate to see.” Hermione pressed the edge of her fan against her chin. “He smiled and I very nearly invited him to run away with me. Those eyes are so blue I believe they could actually define the color. And what a marvelous physique.”

“Grandmother really.” Meg shifted on the stiff sofa, trying not to imagine all of Alec’s many attributes. “It’s hardly proper to mention a gentleman’s physique.”

Hermione swept her fan in an elegant gesture of dismissal. “When a gentleman is fashioned in a manner as Lord Dunleith, I defy any female who has left the school room not to notice. I can see why he interests you.”

“*Interested* me. I’m no longer a foolish young girl. I assure you I want nothing at all to do with his type. I prefer a nice quiet gentleman, like Grandfather Chadburne. A scholarly gentleman. A man who prefers home and hearth over war and glory.” It was true, she assured that foolish girl still hiding in the back of her mind, lurking there along with all her silly notions of romance. Alec was not the right type of man. He was in fact the type of man who could take a foolish girl’s heart and smash it into so many pieces she would never be able to fit them together again. She knew the reality of this from experience.

“Little wonder you are having such difficulty finding a gentleman who catches your interest.” Hermione flicked

her fan closed. “A man such as you described would be terrified to approach you.”

Meg’s spine straightened with indignation. “I don’t see how I could possibly frighten a nice, quiet young man.”

“You are a handsome young woman, remarkably so. Yet, you have cultivated a manner that defies any gentleman to approach you. A few years ago, when you, Marisa, and Emily were all still unmarried they called you *The Furies*.”

Meg huffed. “A term coined by a gentleman in a fit of pique over having his suit rejected by Marisa. I suspect it was that horrible Mr. Ormsby.”

Hermione lifted one finely arched eyebrow. “I believe you are now known as *The Snow Queen*.”

Meg had heard the unflattering title. “I wish I knew who started that bit of slander.”

“It takes a great deal of confidence to ask you to dance, much less anything else. Most quiet young men would not risk getting close to you for fear of being turned to ice. A little like Medusa and snakes and turning men to stone.” Hermione arched her eyebrows. “I’m certain you grasp the idea.”

“It’s most unkind to attach such labels to people, but I have found kindness to be a trait often lacking in members of the *ton*.” She shot her grandmother a meaningful glance. “I’m certain you grasp the idea.”

Hermione’s expression assured Meg she still had the ability to look past any veil Meg might try to hide behind. “Are you certain you haven’t developed that attitude to keep gentlemen at a distance?”

Meg shrugged, trying to look nonchalant over a subject that irked her on more than one occasion. “I never seem to catch the interest of the right sort of gentlemen.”

“Over the past few years, you have caught the attention of several young men who would have suited you well. Granted the gentlemen were not quiet scholars, but instead quite bold and dashing, the type of men who would truly suit you. And yet, you didn’t encourage anyone.”

Meg thought of the gentlemen who had sought her hand in marriage. Once or twice she had almost accepted an offer, but something had held her back, an idea that she would somehow be settling for a man she didn’t truly love. And when she reflected on the reasons for her spinsterhood, she had to admit more than a little fear that the gentleman she accepted might not truly love her. Particularly when no gentleman ever seemed interested in looking past the elegant façade she presented to the *ton*.

Perhaps no one seemed particularly interested in a deep abiding love because there was no need for love in marriage as far as many members of the *ton* were concerned. Husbands had their mistresses, wives their lovers. It wasn’t a life she wanted to lead.

Meg was aware of her grandmother watching her and knew a response was required. “Many of the gentlemen who offered for me are now married.”

“Because you refused them.”

“Because not one of them cared enough to persist.” Meg stared at the head of the sphinx across from her while she tried to express her feelings without betraying her own unfortunate attachment. “If one of those gentlemen had truly loved me, he would have pursued me even after I refused his offer. Instead, many of the gentlemen who have asked for my hand found other women to marry.”

“It’s an interesting view. But, a true gentleman might feel it quite ungentlemanly to continue a suit once a lady has refused him. And not all men are willing to sacrifice their entire life pining over one woman. I believe it’s possible to find happiness with more than one person.”

Meg did not subscribe to that theory. True she had long ago realized she was a fool. She was trying to mend her ways, but it seemed a bit late now. “I suppose the right gentleman has never asked me to marry him.”

Hermione paused a moment, as though she weighed her words carefully before she spoke. “Perhaps it’s difficult for you to trust any gentleman, after what happened with your father and mother.”

Meg felt that shifting within her that came when she thought of her father, the anger and pain all melding together to form an uncomfortable lump just above her lungs. “Perhaps the gentlemen who offered for me were simply too arrogant for my taste.”

Hermione patted Meg’s hand. “There is nothing wrong with strong men, Meg. You just have to learn to handle them. It’s a little like taking the reins of a powerful stallion. He might be a little more difficult to control, but the ride is exhilarating.”

Meg wondered what her grandmother might truly know of strong, arrogant men. She had been married from the age of sixteen until her husband’s death three years ago. Were a few of the gentlemen Hermione considered friends better acquainted with her grandmother than Meg ever suspected? “You chose a nice quiet man.”

“I married young. I had Joanna before my seventeenth birthday.” Hermione tapped her fan against her open palm. “At my age, I have to admit there are things I might have done differently.”

Meg stared at her grandmother, reluctant to believe the truth in her grandmother’s eyes. “I thought you were happy with Grandfather.”

“I didn’t despise my life with Chadburne. But I wanted to travel. His idea of travel was a trip into the village. I liked dancing and he liked to watch. I adored parties and he preferred to stay at home. He also had little interest in...”

Hermione paused, as though she realized she was about to say something better left unsaid. She drummed her fingertips on the head of the sphinx adorning the arm of the sofa. “At times I longed for a bit more excitement.”

“I suspect I would do better with a nice, quiet, steady gentleman. Deep affection and shared interests is what would suit me. Alec MacLaren is a perfect example of the wrong type of man—heart wrenchingly handsome, all dash and excitement, the type of man who can melt a lady’s intellect along with her heart. If I were foolish, I would convince myself he came here to see me on his own accord.” Meg looked at her grandmother. “Obviously he did not.”

Hermione hesitated a moment before she spoke. “I’m sorry, Meg. But I cannot think of why Lord Dunleith would suddenly appear after all of these years if not on a mission from your father. Especially considering Blandford is his cousin.”

“Yes, of course. I’m not foolish enough to think Lord Dunleith came to see me for any other reason.” Meg stuffed her disappointment into the box containing all the other disappointments she had suffered because of the unfortunate affliction otherwise known as *Alec MacLaren*.

Meg had long ago realized Alec would not suit her. He was cut from the same cloth as her father. It had become part of her daily ritual to remind herself of how little the man suited her. Apparently the remedy had not taken hold, because she still thought of him daily. “Do you think he will try to see me again? Not that I care. I certainly don’t care. I was just curious.”

Hermione lifted her eyebrows and assumed a look of pure innocence. “Since he isn’t at all the type of man you would consider as a husband, I wonder why you would want to see him.”

“I don’t, not in that regard. I think of him as an old friend. Nothing more.” Meg avoided her grandmother’s gaze. Instead she stared at a wall sconce near the jade marble hearth beyond her grandmother, watching the flicker of flame find color in the golden crystal globe which comprised the face and headdress of a pharaoh. “I assure you, I would never consider marriage to Alec MacLaren.”

“I understand. From what I observed, Lord Dunleith is certainly not the type of man you described as your ideal. I can see why he would *not* interest you at all.”

“Precisely. He is everything I *don’t* want in a husband.”

Hermione made a soft humming sound of agreement. “I doubt he is the type of man to have his plans foiled by an old woman with a sharp tongue. I suspect he will try to see you again, particularly since I forbade him from returning. He will probably seek you during one of your walks. And when he does, you must allow him to believe you are not entirely opposed to Blandford. Otherwise, my entire plan will be ruined. If your father doesn’t believe there is a danger of you turning your inheritance over to Blandford, he will have no reason to come here again in the near future.”

Meg rubbed her arms, feeling chilled suddenly. Robert Drummond had a temper that would impress his Viking ancestors. “I wonder what Father will do when he comes here.”

“I’m certain he would never harm you.”

Meg had her doubts. Although she knew her father would never strike her, he could devise other means to punish her.

“I find I’m quite exhausted. It comes from feigning interest in Blandford’s conversation.” Hermione kissed her cheek. “I suggest we retire for the evening. I will have chocolate sent to your room. It will help you sleep.”

\*\*\*

An hour later, Meg still couldn’t find any peace in slumber. She stood in her bed chamber, staring through an open window at the stars. It wasn’t often one could see the stars in London.

A faint scent of burning coal drifted on the cool air. The air in London was never as sweet as in Somerset. And Somerset could not compare to the Highlands. For all the years she had lived in England, she had never forgotten the scent of heather in the rain. No matter how long she lived here, no matter how hard she tried to bury her past, she suspected a part of her would always miss home.

High above, a few brave stars defied the London haze and burned silvery holes in the gray-black sky. She found the cluster forming the little bear and picked the brightest star, as her father had taught her when she was a child.

*You see that star, Meg. That’s our special star. When you have grown up and you are away from me, you can look up at that star and know I’m looking at it too, thinking of my wee lass.*

Did Father ever look at that star and think of her? Her throat tightened with the threat of tears. The reason she still allowed him to hurt her was beyond her comprehension.

She rubbed her arms, fighting the chill of the evening, her hands sliding against the soft green velvet of her dressing gown. But she couldn’t quell the chill of memories and broken dreams. One of these days Father would regret tossing her away like an old boot. One of these days—

*What was that?*

Although she heard nothing, she sensed movement behind her, a shifting of air in the shadows. Shivers skittered across her skin, raising the fine hair on her arms. Someone was in the room. In the next instant a strong arm whipped

around her waist, dragging her back against a chest as hard as oak. She opened her mouth to scream. The intruder clamped his hand over her mouth, capturing the sound against his warm palm.

Fear shot through her, flashing along her nerves like electricity arcing across a wire. She struggled against her attacker, twisting in his powerful arms.

“Easy,” he whispered.

Desperate with fear she clawed at the hand clamped to her mouth. When that accomplished nothing, she swung her elbows back, ramming her attacker square in the chest. His breath whooshed past her ear. His grip slackened for an instant. With all of her weight, she plunged against his arm, breaking free, lunging straight for the open window.

He grabbed her arm, dragging her back from the fall. He wrapped one strong arm around her, imprisoning her arms to her sides, while he clamped his other hand over her mouth. “Take it easy, Meg, before you hurt yourself.”

Memory stirred with the sound of his dark voice, colored with the soft burr of the Scottish upper class. Meg froze in his powerful embrace. Her heart pounded; her skin tingled with the sudden awareness of who held her.

“I’m not going to hurt you. It’s me, Alec. Alec MacLaren.”





## Chapter Two

*Alec!* The room whirled. If he hadn't been holding her she would have dissolved in a heap on the floor. The strength of his body pressed against her, the velvet of her dressing gown, the fine white cotton of her night rail providing little protection. He held her close, in a fashion she had only ever known in her dreams.

"Promise not to scream?"

Meg nodded, too stunned by his presence to think of the improprieties of the situation. He eased his hand away from her mouth and released her, grinning at her when she pivoted to face him.

Light from the windows spilled over him, slipping silver into the thick black waves framing his face. The silvery light sculpted the sharply defined features of a face that could steal a woman's fancy with one glimpse.

Excitement bubbled inside of her, like water in a steaming kettle, obliterating the fact he had crept into her bedchamber. Questions buzzed in her head—why and what and how. Yet the questions flickered like fireflies in a lightning storm. Nothing could slice through the muddle he had made of her brain.

Perhaps if he were not so close she might manage rational thought. Yet all she could think about was the simple reality of Alec. Her Alec. He was alive and so close she could touch him. She couldn't of course. She must not rest her hand against his cheek and feel the curve of his smile beneath her palm. Her hand flickered at her side. Of course she couldn't!

She stared at him, trying to scrape together the raveling edges of her composure. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you this afternoon, only to be sent away by your grandmother."

"Oh." She was staring at the man. She knew it. Yet knowing of and amending her actions were two entirely different things. She tried to reconcile the image of him as she had last seen him nine years ago with the man he was today. In her dreams, both waking and sleeping, she always saw him as he was that day on the cliffs above the loch. But the years had changed him.

His nose had once been slim and straight; it now had a thickening just below the bridge, marking a past break. Instead of lessening his appeal somehow the imperfection made him all the more handsome, harmonizing perfectly with the prominent cheekbones and strong jaw, intensifying his masculinity. Thick black lashes framed the eyes she had always loved, eyes filled with a glint of determination, eyes that had haunted her dreams for as long as she could remember. The slender boy she had known had developed into a splendidly proportioned, powerfully built, distractingly handsome man.

The glitter of amusement that rose in his eyes told her Alec knew exactly how attractive she found him. He lowered his eyes, favoring her with a similar inspection. Meg felt his gaze as keenly as a soft brush of strong, masculine hands across her skin. His gaze slid in a warm caress from the lace just beneath her chin to her black slippers peeking out from the hem of her dressing gown. Excitement surged in the wake of that gaze, setting her limbs trembling like leaves in a summer storm.

"You did a fine job growing up, Meg," Alec said softly.

His darker than midnight voice, colored by that intriguing Scottish burr flowed over her, making her warm and achy inside. Countless times in the past nine years Meg had imagined this man noticing her across a crowded ballroom. Never had she imagined Alec storming into her bedchamber.

*Alec was in her bedchamber.*

Oh my goodness! The realization snapped her out of her besotted stupor. She stepped back, putting six feet of carpet between them. "You need to leave."

"I need to speak with you."

"In my chamber? Did a maggot crawl into your head?"

"Now Meg, is that any way to greet an old friend?"

Apparently he thought she was still besotted with him, to the point of throwing propriety out the window. The fact he was far too close to the truth made her all the more determined to put him squarely in his place.

She lifted her chin, assuming the haughty attitude she had learned her first London Season. She only hoped he wouldn't notice the way she was trembling. She thought of calling the servants, but she had no intention of subjecting herself to the scandal that would follow. Servants loved gossip. And this would be a banquet for them. "I can only imagine the wounds you suffered in battle somehow addled your brain. If you think for one moment I will welcome a visit from you in my chamber, you are very much mistaken."

He regarded her in a fashion meant to take her measure. "Does that icy look freeze most of the gentlemen you know?"

"The gentlemen I know would never do anything so scandalous as to barge into my chamber." She clasped her hands at her waist, hoping to appear stern while her knees threatened to buckle. "I insist you leave."

"Not without you. I have a coach in the lane behind your house, waiting to take you back home."

"A coach? Waiting for me?" His words swirled in her befuddled brain. "I've had all of this nonsense I'm going to

tolerate. If you want to speak with me, you can call upon me tomorrow. In a proper fashion.”

“When I paid a call this afternoon, your grandmother said you were about to accept a suitor, and she would not have me causing any trouble.” He raised his hands at his sides. “This was the only way I could see you. For all I knew you would be engaged by tomorrow.”

Meg fought to maintain a semblance of her composure. “No matter what my grandmother said, you have no right to sneak into my chamber in this manner.”

“Your father asked me to bring you home, by any means necessary.” A muscle flickered in his cheek with the clenching of his jaw. “I cannot allow you to marry my cousin Blandford.”

Meg clenched her hands so tightly, her nails dug into her palms. Still, she managed to keep her voice low and controlled. “I don’t believe I need your permission to do anything.”

“Do you have any idea what Blandford did to the crofters when he thought he had inherited Dunleith? He evicted each and every one, families who had lived on MacLaren land for generations. He spent more money in two months than my family did in a year. He would ruin the land and ruin you. You cannot marry him.”

Anger burned brightly in this man, an inferno ready to devour anyone who got too close. The look in his eyes astonished her. Although he had always been stubborn, bold and brash, he had also been a gentle boy, quick to laughter, warm and vibrant as the hills in summer. Yet the look in his eyes was that of a man who could kill with his bare hands.

“When last I looked you had no right to tell me what I could and could not do, Alec MacLaren. It’s been nine years since I last saw you. In all those years you never once thought it important to pay me a single call.” As soon as she spoke them she wished she could call back her words. She only hoped he didn’t realize the hurt still lingering from his lack of interest.

The look in his eyes shattered all hope of hiding her emotions. The look in those stunning blue eyes and the smile curving his generous lips told her he understood precisely how she felt. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Meg. I never spent much time in London. And I never truly thought you would be waiting for me to come home.”

“I certainly was not waiting for you to come home.” She waved her hand toward the door as she continued. “You can run along to my father and tell him I’m old enough to make my own decisions.”

“I cannot allow you to marry my cousin.” Alec inhaled, long and steady, as though gripping the reins of his emotions. “I know you’re angry that I never came to see you. But I had reasons.”

“There is no need to dredge up the past, MacLaren. You didn’t see fit to visit me then, and I see no reason for you to visit me now. I’m certainly not going to run away with you tonight.”

“I was in the army. Aside from country house parties with friends, when I had leave I spent most of my time at home. Colin said you had men lined up trying to catch your interest. Even if I had visited, why would you bother with a poor soldier when you could have a wealthy peer?” Alec held her gaze, his expression revealing curiosity, as though he had suddenly come upon a puzzle worth solving. “You said you would wait for me, but I didn’t believe you actually would.”

“I have not been waiting for you.” Meg groaned, wishing she could go back in time and talk some sense into her younger self. “I said things the last time we met I now find regrettable. My only excuse was my naiveté.”

Alec held her in a steady regard, his lips slightly parted, his eyes filled with questions. “You never married.”

Meg cringed at the implication in his voice. She scraped together every shred of control to keep her voice low and her emotions from betraying her. “Do I look like that terribly naïve young girl you knew, MacLaren? The love-sick child who thought the sun rose and set with you?”

“No, you don’t look like that girl.” Alec studied her a long moment, as though he were stripping her bare and examining every detail of her face and form.

Meg felt the caress of that gaze as warmly as a hand brushed across her skin. A tingle started in her core and spiraled outward in all directions until she trembled from head to toe. All from a mere look. She must be insane!

“The girl I knew was warm as summer and filled with an untamed spirit. The simple fact you would consider a man such as Blandford tells me you have changed.”

And not for the better as far as he was concerned, she thought. She tried to ignore the sharp stab of pain from his words that caused a tightening of her throat and a sting in her eyes. She would not humiliate herself with tears. Yet the emotions she had controlled for the past nine years seemed intent on making a fool of her over this man. It took several moments before she could use her voice. “Since we were friends a long time ago, I shall give you the opportunity to leave without summoning a watchman.”

He inclined his head. “A watchman would certainly cause a great deal of notice to the situation.”

He knew she couldn’t draw attention to the situation. The fact he had come into her chamber uninvited certainly would not matter. All that would matter was the simple fact a man had been alone with her.

Good gracious, if they had been caught alone in a drawing room it would have tarnished her reputation. But alone in her bed chamber! The scandal would ruin her and her family.

She fixed him in a look that had sent many an unwelcome suitor scurrying for cover. With an elegant gesture of

dismissal, she lifted her hand toward the door. "Leave."

He smiled, a hard glint entering his eyes. "I'm not leaving without you."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Have you really changed so completely?" Alec moved toward her with the slow, powerful grace of a man in command of his realm. "Is there anything left of the lass I knew?"

She retreated, backtracking as he advanced, trying desperately to maintain her poise. Her years in London had taught her how to deal with all manner of men. Yet this was Alec. Nothing had prepared her for Alec. "I assure you there is nothing left of the wild girl you knew."

"You were a lovely girl." He looked at her in a way that made her feel he was studying a painting he found fascinating. "But you've grown more handsome than I could have imagined."

Hope kindled inside of her at his soft words. *Foolish woman!* Only a fool would be swayed by a man's false declarations. "Oh dear, I do believe I may swoon from such flattery."

Alec laughed softly. "I'm going to enjoy getting reacquainted with you."

"I'm not at all certain I want to become better acquainted with you." She bumped into a bedpost at the foot of her bed. He approached, as though he were enjoying himself. Before she could escape, he gripped the thickly carved post behind her with both hands and leaned toward her, trapping her. "Step away from me."

He leaned closer. "Do you wish to pack a bag before we leave?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you." She spoke slowly, distinctly, a governess teaching a reluctant student, a governess who was having a great deal of trouble finding enough air to shape her words. All the air evaporated around him, as though he were a flame, devouring everything in his path.

"Lord in heaven, Meg. You could freeze a man to his marrow with that look. A proper English Ice Princess, that's what you are." He studied her a moment, as though he were trying to piece together a puzzle. "You have me curious about something."

His breath fell softly against her face as he spoke, warm and moist, filled with a scent that held a subtle sweetness, like a freshly cut plum. She pressed back against the bedpost, trying to increase the distance between them. How in the world was she supposed to think when he was this close? "What?"

"How many men have you left petrified in your wake? Frozen from one glare?"

No one realized the walls were built for protection. No one had ever been able to breach her ramparts. But the men who had tried were not Alec. A lush male heat reached across the sliver of air between them, teasing her, beckoning her to lean toward him. She pressed her spine into the bedpost. "I believe I asked you to leave."

"I have to admit, all that ice is tempting."

She swallowed hard. "Tempting?"

"It makes me want to melt it." Alec slid his arm around her waist, slipped his other hand into her hair and cradled the nape of her neck. Before she could utter more than a gasp, he hauled her against his chest. In the next heartbeat he captured her lips beneath his.

Meg pushed against his shoulders. Alec didn't notice her protest. He didn't seem to care that she stood rigid in his hold; her lips sealed, her protest clearly stated without words. Instead of releasing her, he slanted his lips over hers, slowly, gently, plying her with this sweet temptation.

She curled her hands into fists against his shoulders. He would find her a sculpture, cold to his advances. She would prove to him she had abandoned her affection for him long ago. She would not be moved by the man. If he thought for one moment—he touched the tip of his tongue against her lips. Oh my goodness, she had never felt anything like this before.

Alec slid his lips across hers in a lazy glide, as though he had all the time in the world. Soft and firm at the same time, his kiss revealed a secret she had never expected. Heat kindled in the sweet friction, a delicious burn that simmered along her every nerve. She snatched at her retreating will. Yet the warmth of Alec radiated against her, melting her resistance, like wax over an open flame.

Meg had never been kissed. It was improper to touch a man's hand without benefit of gloves. She certainly had never allowed any man the liberty of touching his lips to hers. Indeed, she would have slapped any man who so much as tried. But this was Alec holding her. Alec kissing her. Her Alec. The man who had haunted her dreams for as long as she could remember.

Alec slid his lips across her cheek, nuzzled the skin beneath her right ear then nipped her ear lobe. She gasped at the sensation skittering along her nerves. "I insist you..."

"Kiss you again?"

Meg shook her head. "You must..."

"Aye, I must." He slanted his lips over hers, catching her startled sigh.

Alec slid his hand upward, from her waist to the curve of her shoulder blade and back down again, warming her with each slow stroke. He held her head cradled in his large hand, holding her captive while he conjured magic within

her. His scent teased her senses, a trace of sandalwood soap and leather mingling with a scent she could not define, tugging at her in a curious fashion.

A voice of propriety shouted in her brain. She could not allow this. Yet it was as though he had slipped a tether around her, drawing her toward him. That sane voice of propriety slipped into the heat Alec kindled inside of her, evaporating like raindrops in the sun. He was so warm, a breath of summer exhaled on a cold winter's day. Nothing had prepared her for his kiss, not her imagination, not her dreams.

Over the years Meg had often indulged in lovely fantasies of Alec MacLaren. In her imagination, Alec would come to her. In dreams Meg had felt Alec's arms around her. In dreams she had tasted his kisses. In dreams she had imagined desire. Yet now she realized her maidenly thoughts of desire bore little resemblance to reality.

She had imagined desire a pleasant emotion, warm and comforting. Yet now, with his lips moving against hers, and his body so close she could feel the potent power of him, she realized her mistake. She had misunderstood. She had completely underestimated the emotion.

Desire mocked her feeble attempt at resistance. Desire was as powerful as a storm racing across the sea. Desire rushed over her, a savage wave, enveloping her, dragging her away from shore. Without realizing it, Meg had been waiting for this moment all of her life. Without thought she slid her arms around his neck and held him, pressing close against him, afraid he would disappear like a phantom of her dreams.

At her surrender, she sensed a flicker of surprise in his kiss, a moment of stillness, a quick intake of his breath, as though she had caught him off guard. She moved her lips against his, afraid he would stop kissing her, terrified he would continue.

A low growl issued from deep in his throat. Alec pulled her closer, his powerful arms lifting her upward, until her toes barely touched the floor. She clung to him, sipping the potent elixir of his kiss, absorbing the reality of him.

Meg snuggled against his hardened frame, trying to get closer to him. She slipped her hand into the ebony waves at his nape, plunging her fingers into cool strands of silk.

Something awakened in her, something primal, something she didn't understand, something so compelling she could not find the means to push it back into the shadows from whence it came. She felt more alive than ever before, as though every nerve in her body had been sleeping until this moment, until this man.

Alec stiffened against her, his arms tightening around her, holding her close, allowing her to feel the powerful thrust of his body against her. In the next instant he pulled away from her. She clung to him like a drowning woman. For an eternity he stood looking into her eyes, his breath as quick and ragged as her own. She saw questions in his eyes, as though she had confused him as much as he had confounded her.

Finally, he gripped her arms and eased away from her, drawing her arms from around his neck. He held her at arm's length, as though he couldn't decide whether to push her away or draw her back into his arms.

She stared up at him, dazed, as wobbly as a newborn fawn. She looked at his lips, those soft lips—moist and full and so very tempting. She lifted, wanting those warm lips against hers. At that moment she wanted nothing more than to be kissed by this man, held and touched and devoured by this man, only this man.

He pulled away as she drew near. "Another kiss isn't a good idea, Meg."

Another kiss was a wonderful idea, she thought. She had waited nine years for that kiss, and it was better than her wildest imagination. One kiss would never be enough. She lifted, her lips parting. Oh yes, another kiss was precisely what she wanted.

He pressed his fingertip against her lips. "So it would seem there is something of the spirited lass I once knew hidden inside the proper English Ice Princess."

Meg flinched as though he had struck her. She stepped back and bumped into the bedpost, rapping the back of her head against solid mahogany. She gasped at the sharp sting of pain.

Alec sucked in his breath between his teeth. "That must have hurt."

Not as much as the truth. Alec had marched in here intending to manipulate and control her. And she had allowed it to happen. She had followed him like a besotted puppy. Once again she had made a fool of herself with this man. "Go away, Alec. Please, leave."

Alec touched her cheek. "Bonnie fair and warm as summer."

Meg pushed his hand aside. "I want you to leave."

"Come back home, Meg."

*Home.* How many years had she longed to return home to Penross House? In a secret part of her, she had always believed it was where she belonged, where she had always belonged, in the Highlands with this man. *Foolish woman.* "I'm not going with you, MacLaren."

"I was hoping we could do this the easy way." Alec pulled a white silk scarf from his coat pocket and gripped her arm.

Meg stared at the scarf. "What is that for?"

"I really do regret this."

Meg twisted in his grasp. “Take your hand off of me.”

“I apologize for this.” Alec spun her around and released her.

“Alec MacLaren, what the devil—” Before she realized his intention, he whipped the scarf around her mouth. She struggled, clawing at his hands as he tied the scarf behind her head.

Alec grabbed her wrists and drew them behind her. “Trust me, Meg. I won’t hurt you.”

Meg screamed, her voice muffled by the silk gag. He pulled a second scarf from his pocket and tied her wrists together. She twisted, trying to jerk her wrists from his grasp.

“Easy. You’ll hurt yourself.” He gripped her shoulders and turned her around to face him. “I promise you, everything will be fine.”

She kicked him, her foot connecting with the boot covering his shin. The pain careened up her leg, dragging a gasp from her lips. The brute endured the blow with a smile.

“Ah, Meg. In time you’ll understand.” Alec bent and tossed her over his shoulder. “This is all for your own good.”



## Chapter Three

Alec carried Meg from the room, his arm around her thighs, the plump curve of her hip against his cheek. The scent of vanilla mingled with a spicy floral scent, teasing him. Desire stirred in his belly, swirling heat through his loins. He clenched his jaw, fighting the need curling deep inside of him.

The kiss had been a mistake. She had been so tempting, so prim and proper in her indignation, he hadn't been able to resist. He hadn't expected her reaction, her warm response to the kiss. He hadn't realized how quickly she would set fire to his blood.

He couldn't remember a time when a kiss had left him as shaken as a green recruit facing his first battle. Did she have any idea how tempting she was? One moment she was kissing him as though her world would shatter if the kiss should end. The next she was glaring daggers at him with eyes as green as a glen in springtime. Even in her fury, those eyes were beautiful.

Lord in heaven, she tempted him to chip away all the ice and find the fiery lass beneath. Another kiss in her bedchamber and he would have tumbled her back across her bed, pushed her skirts high along those long legs and plunged into the feminine core of her. The need to possess her had hit him hard and fast, catching him off guard. He had never felt the hunger so keenly, so irresistibly, so completely. And he was supposed to protect her. No doubt about it, he had to tread carefully with Meg.

He would have to be careful to keep his distance in the future. They had a long trip ahead of them, and he intended to deliver her safely into her father's keeping. After he returned her to Robert, he could only hope she would see reason. If not...he would rather not think of that alternative and the consequences that would follow.

Meg squirmed and kicked, hitting nothing but air. She wiggled and shouted, the sounds muffled by the gag. Yet Alec was certain he heard something about boiling oil in the muttered curses. "Careful Meg, you'll have someone coming to see what's happening. You don't want anyone to see you like this, do you?"

She froze in his grasp. He knew the scandal of the situation would ruin her reputation. Meg knew it as well. She mumbled something that sounded a great deal like *miserable scoundrel*.

Alec cringed at the epitaph. He was doing this for her own good, he assured himself. No matter what she might think, Meg didn't belong with Blandford. He couldn't allow her to marry the bastard.

He carried her down the back stairs, across a narrow hall and out the back door; following the way he had taken to Meg's room, a route detailed by one of the maids, a girl only too willing to help him for a few pieces of gold.

Meg twisted and bucked, remaining quiet but determined to break free of his grasp. Right now she wanted to kill him, Alec thought. At the moment she was contemplating the ways she would do the deed. In time he would make her understand this was all for the best, he assured himself.

He knew women. By the time they reached Penross House, he would have her purring like a kitten. She rammed her knee into the side of his chest. He grimaced with a sudden flare of pain. In the meantime, he made a mental note to keep sharp objects away from her.

Alec hurried along a brick-lined path leading to the lane behind the house. His black traveling coach stood hitched to a team of four matched grays, waiting to whisk them away from town.

One of his servants opened the door to the coach, casting his master a smile. "'Tis a bonnie night, milord."

Alec grinned. "Aye, Finlay. A bonnie fair night."

Meg twisted, her body stiff with rage. Alec carried his fair burden inside the coach. Finlay closed the door behind him. Meg wailed, bucking wildly on his shoulder.

As the coach lurched forward, Alec eased her to one of the seats. Meg tumbled back against the black velvet squabs, her unbound hair spilling over her face in a thick curtain of honey-colored silk. Alec tried not to notice the way her dressing gown and night rail had twisted around her thighs, revealing the smooth curves of her shapely legs, the delicate turn of her ankles.

He sank to the seat across from her, trying to catch his breath. The nagging stretch of pain in his side reminded him of the worst of his recent wounds. Although the skin had knitted nicely, the damage beneath still needed time to completely heal.

The trip from Dunleith had taken more out of him than he had expected. True Meg's curves were ample, yet the fact he was winded after carrying her such a short distance confirmed the fact he had a long way to go before he was fully recovered. Meg sat up, trying to toss her hair back from her face.

Alec knelt on his knees in front of her. "I'm not going to hurt you, Meg."

He smoothed the hair back from her face. When he saw the expression on her beautiful face, he nearly allowed the hair to slide back into place over her face. Meg glared at him, her eyes narrowed to green slits, her lips taut over the gag, her cheeks high with color. The back of his neck prickled. Women were unpredictable at best. When angry, there was nothing in the world more dangerous.

He tugged on the gag. Even if she was angry, he could certainly handle her. He had a way with women, always

had. And Meg had always had a soft spot for him. She might not want to admit it now, but he suspected she still had a *tendrè* for him.

When he pulled the silk away from her mouth, she didn't say a word. She simply sat there, glaring at him as though she wanted to tear him to shreds with her bare hands. The silence was far more menacing than a tirade would have been. The tiny hairs at the back of his neck prickled.

He stared into her furious green eyes and wondered what defense a man could use against an angry woman. He couldn't strike her. Any man who raised a hand against a woman was less than a coward. So what defense did that leave him? He had an uneasy feeling he was going to have to figure it out. Soon.

Alec slid his fingertips over her cheek, and tucked a thick strand of hair behind her ear. "I should remind you they hang people for murder."

She made a small huffing sound high in her throat. "I suspect I could convince a magistrate your death was completely justified."

"If you turn a wee bit, I'll untie you."

Meg turned on the seat, presenting him her stiff back. Alec lifted her hair, the silky strands sliding through his fingers, the scent of spicy vanilla curling around him. Light from the interior coach lamps rippled through the long veil of silk, finding reddish highlights nestled in the honey-colored curls.

For a moment he became distracted, staring at her hair, resisting the urge to bury his face in the fragrant mane. Unbidden, images flickered in his brain, bare skin against white sheets, the silky glide of her hair across his bare chest—treacherous thoughts sparking a desire that sank like claws into his belly.

Meg glanced over her shoulder and caught him staring like an idiot at her hair. She lifted one eyebrow, as though to ask *what the devil are you doing?* Good question, he thought. Alec dropped the tresses over her shoulder.

"I know you're angry now." He drew the white silk away from her wrists, frowning at the red marks the binding had left on her skin.

Meg pivoted on the cushion, fixing him in a furious stare. She rubbed her wrists and looked at him as though he had just crawled out from beneath the nearest rock.

Alec sat back on the seat across from her. "But I'm certain, in time, you'll see—"

"Blackguard!" Meg scrambled from her seat and lunged for him, ramming her shoulder into his chest.

Pain from wounds suffered in battle vibrated through him, snatching the breath from his lungs. Alec fell back against the cushions. Meg sprawled across his chest, her hip jabbing his belly. Pain flickered with each bounce of her lush body against his chest, as she twisted and squirmed and pounded her fists against his shoulders.

"Stop this coach!" Meg thumped her fists against his shoulders, punctuating each word. "Take me home."

"Damnation!" He grabbed her wrists and shifted, dragging her down to the padded seat.

"Let go of me!" Meg bucked wildly, ramming his belly with her knee.

Alec swallowed a groan. He pinned her against the cushion, crushing her struggles beneath his body. "Enough!"

Instantly she stopped flailing at him. She lay pinned against the seat cushion, her glorious hair spilled around her face; her eyes wide with the sudden shock of having a man flush against her.

Alec admitted he was experiencing a shock of his own. The firm mounds of her full breasts pressed against his chest, searing him through the layers of their clothing. He was aware of every place her body touched his, as though she was a flame burning him. This would not do. Not at all. He prided himself on his control. And he didn't intend to lose it. There was far too much at stake.

"If you cannot behave yourself, I'm going to bind your hands and ankles and keep you tied up until we reach Penross House."

"Until we reach Penross House?" Meg narrowed her eyes. "Do you truly suppose you can keep me tied up for days?"

The gentle rocking of the coach rubbed her breasts against his chest, brushed her belly against his hardening frame, coaxing heat to shimmer through his blood. He had never seen anything as intriguing as Meg in a fit of fury, her eyes flashing fire, her breasts rising and falling with every angry breath. It made him wonder what it might be like to divert all that fire in a much more pleasurable direction. And that was a direction his thoughts had no business taking, he reminded himself. She was under his protection. He had no intention of betraying his responsibility.

"We have a long journey ahead of us, Meg. We can pass the time pleasantly, or you can be tied up like an unruly animal. The choice is up to you. Are you willing to try acting like a lady instead of a hoyden?"

She huffed, her breath touching his face, making him want to draw closer. "You have the audacity to criticize my behavior?"

"Well now, you have to admit you've hardly been behaving like a lady."

"Why you...you...Get off of me, you big brute."

It was easy to tease her and far too much fun. "Promise to behave?"

"I promise to make you regret the day you were born."



“Then I guess I will just have to...” Alec knew he couldn’t keep her tied up for the trip. He needed another way to force her into a truce. “Kiss you.”

Meg stared at him, her eyes growing wide. “You will do nothing of the kind.”

He brushed his lips across her brow. “Agree to stop fighting me.”

Meg turned her head, trying to escape his touch. “Let me go!”

Alec nuzzled the smooth skin beneath her right ear. “Ah, you smell good. Vanilla with a hint of something spicy. Jasmine?”

She twisted beneath him. “Stop it!”

He tasted her skin with the tip of his tongue—soft, slightly salty and entirely seductive in her innocence. “Hmm, you taste good too.”

“I demand you release me!”

Alec nipped her earlobe. “And you’re warm.”

“Stop it.”

He skimmed his lips against the skin beneath her ear. “Do you promise to behave yourself?”

“Brute!”

He brushed kisses down the length of her neck, praying she would give up the battle soon. She was far too tempting. And he had not been with a woman since the night before Quatre Bras. Although he suspected it wouldn’t have mattered with this woman. He had an uncomfortable suspicion she could warm his blood if he had just made love to a hundred women. At the moment the proof of her allure pounded low in his belly, his rod rising to attention, taut and hard and hungry for a taste of her. “Of course, I don’t mind if you want to argue with me all night. I’ll just keep kissing you.”

“You have no right to do this.”

Alec pushed aside the lacy edge of her night rail with his nose, her warmth bathing his skin, her scent flooding his senses. He nuzzled the soft skin at the joining of her neck and shoulder. Need clenched him, his breeches growing far too tight. “Are you this soft everywhere, Meg?”

“All right! I promise.”

He lifted far enough to look down into her eyes. “Do you give me your word that you will behave properly for the entire trip? That you will return to Penross House with me without giving me any more trouble?”

She glared at him through narrowed eyes. “I would dearly love to throttle you.”

He lowered his head until his lips were just above hers and her every exhalation filled his every breath. The temptation of her lured him. The sudden flicker of uncertainty in her eyes made it all the more difficult to keep from taking that sweet mouth in a take no prisoners kiss. “Give me your word, Meg.”

Meg released her breath in an angry huff that brushed his face with a soft scent of chocolate. “Get off of me!”

He suspected she had enjoyed a cup of chocolate just before he had entered her room. He had tasted it in her kiss. He just wished he didn’t crave another taste. He came in closer, his lips skimming hers as he spoke. “Well, what do you say, Meg?”

Meg’s eyes grew wide with panic. “Yes. I give you my word.”

He flicked the tip of his tongue against the corner of her lips. “Upon your honor, you will not try to escape. You agree to my terms?”

“I agree.” She shifted beneath him, torturing him with the brush of her breasts. “Now get off of me.”

Alec lingered a moment longer than he should, enjoying the warmth of her, the scent of her, the press of her lush curves. He saw a glitter of something more interesting than anger in her eyes. There was a spark between them, a flicker of flame that had always been there, a fire that could easily ignite and consume every chance for common sense. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

Alec pulled away from her. He watched her scramble to the seat across from him, her hair swirling against her back. She sank to the black cushions and fixed him in a glare cold enough to freeze the depths of Loch Ness.

He shifted his coat to hide the evidence of her influence over a particular part of his anatomy and then pressed his hand across the ache pounding in his side. Slowly he eased air into his lungs, trying to steady his pulse. Yet the ache pounding low in his belly was by far more troublesome than the pain in his side. He had a feeling this was going to be the longest journey of his life.



## Chapter Four

Meg sat across from Alec, rubbing her wrists trying to erase the warm imprint of his hands upon her skin. She glared at the man lounging against the seat across from her, his long legs stretched out to the side to accommodate their length. Although he was smiling, she detected a tightening at the corners of his lips. He sat holding his side, as though it pained him. "Are you all right?"

He released his breath on a long sigh. "I'm fine."

"What the devil were you thinking? You're scarcely out of a sick bed and you're rampaging around like a marauding Viking, carrying unsuspecting women about on your shoulder."

"Only one unsuspecting woman." He ran his fingertip over his chin in a considering manner. "At least so far this week. It's been slow."

Meg's lips twitched with a wayward smile. "It will serve you right if I injured you."

He widened his eyes. "Bloodthirsty?"

She studied him a moment, looking for any signs of pain. "I didn't injure you, did I?"

"No. You didn't." Alec winked at her. "It does my heart good to know you're concerned about me."

"I'm not so blood thirsty I would wish you ill." Meg hoped he didn't realize the true extent of her concern for him. She had always been a bit of a mutton-headed dolt when it came to Alec MacLaren. Apparently time had not cured her. "I have to believe you're still healing. The *Morning Chronicle* reported you dead at Waterloo, not so many weeks ago."

Alec glanced down at the tip of one gleaming black boot. "They weren't far from wrong."

"You shouldn't be here. You should be home, resting. Only a perfect block would allow my father to talk him into this dreadful mission. Days in a coach traveling to London only to turn around and drive right back. It would serve you right if you fall dreadfully ill."

"If not for your father, I would have died." He looked at her, meeting her gaze with eyes that had haunted her dreams. Yet dreams had not done him justice. "I owe him a great debt of honor."

The clatter of wheels and horseshoes on the macadamized road filled up the silence stretching between them. "I thought you were a man of honor, Alec MacLaren. Yet you allowed Robert Drummond to convince you to bring me back against my will."

"He asked me to see you safely home." Flickering light from the coach lamp above him touched his face with gold, gilding the tips of his long black lashes, the thick fringe casting shadows on the crests of his cheeks. "Your father is concerned about you."

Meg fought the urge to scream her frustration. Not only had her father betrayed her, he had managed to make Alec her enemy. If Robert Drummond had tried to hurt her more, he couldn't possibly have found a better way. "My father is concerned about his land. Not about me."

"You're his daughter, Meg. All he has left in this world," Alec said, his dark voice whispering over her like a soft brush of velvet against her skin. His voice had always been deep, but it seemed richer now. "He's concerned about your future."

"He is concerned I will allow his lands to fall into the hands of an Englishman."

"True. He is worried you will allow Drummond land to fall into the hands of a man like Blandford. I've seen what my cousin is capable of doing."

Meg wondered what her grandmother would say about the outcome of her little attempt to force Robert Drummond to face his wife and daughter. She had known the plan was an incendiary device waiting to explode. And it had, right in her face.

Alec leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs, clasping his hands between his knees. "But Blandford isn't the only reason your father wants you home."

Meg stared at his hands. Alec had such strong hands, the fingers long and tapered. The hands of a warrior. Yet his touch, even when he was quelling her struggles, had been gentle. A tremor rippled through her at the memory of those powerful hands touching her.

She glanced away from those strong hands, her attention snagged by the reflection of her face in the coach window. Her expression revealed her discomfort and more. She had the look of a woman totally and completely besotted with the man in her midst. Oh my goodness, she had to get a grip on this unfortunate affliction known as Alec. "Unless he plans to keep me locked in my room, I will not be staying at Penross House."

"He needs you, Meg."

"Strange, he never needed me before."

"He has always needed you, and your mother. But you both left him."

Meg fixed him in a stare that had quelled many a presumptuous male. "You are hardly in a position to judge my actions. And you certainly have no right to judge my mother."

Alec held her withering stare without flinching. Instead his lips tipped into a smile, as though he knew precisely what she hoped to accomplish with that imperial stare and he found her amusing. Odd but even now, when she was so angry with him she wanted to box his ears, she couldn't deny the attraction, as though he held a ribbon tied around her and he was pulling gently, tugging her toward him. Why hadn't the years managed to dull his appeal, at least a little? It was just another example of fate's twisted sense of humor.

"I fought beside Sir Robert Drummond for years. You learn a lot about a man in battle. Your father is an honorable man worthy of your respect."

During the war the *Morning Chronicle* had been filled with tales of bravery, daring tales of men who had risked their lives to vanquish Napoleon. Her father's name had often appeared in the roll of heroes. Robert Drummond had been decorated for valor more than once, as had the man sitting across from her.

"I don't doubt my father's honor in most things. However, he didn't treat my mother with the respect she deserved."

Alec frowned, twin lines creasing the skin between his black brows. "And did she treat your father with the respect he deserved?"

Meg shivered with anger at the implication. Alec had no idea the pain Robert Drummond's arrogance had caused. Alec had never seen her mother sobbing in the middle of the night for the man who had destroyed her world. Meg had. Alec had never wept so hard he made himself ill, wishing for a miracle. Meg had. Alec couldn't understand how betrayed she felt. She had trusted her father more than anyone in the world. "Obviously you cannot understand. You have never been treated as though you were a child with no right to your own opinions."

"I don't pretend to know what truly happened between your parents. I do believe it's important to keep a family together. And running away never solved anything."

Meg hugged her arms to her waist, detesting the fact she wanted him to understand. He was on the wrong side in this and she hated how much it hurt. She loathed the need inside of her, the insidious desire to feel his arms around her.

Never in her life had she experienced anything more thrilling than being held by this man. Sitting this close she caught herself trying to catch a trace of his scent—that clean spicy scent of soap, leather and man. And the strength of him, the intriguing power that radiated from his tall, lean body. Oh my goodness, she really should not think of being held by him.

"Father was too concerned with being Lord and Master of his house to listen to Mother's opinions."

He opened his hands. "Your mother left him."

Meg glared at him, fighting to control her voice and her agitation. Simply being near this man made her skin shimmer and her mind take turns it had no business taking. "We were gone five weeks. I wonder if Father ever told you what happened after we returned to Penross House."

Alec glanced away from her, directing his gaze to the tip of his boot for a moment. When he met her gaze Meg had silent confirmation he knew what her father had done. "No matter what happened with your parents, he is still your father."

"You condone his behavior?"

"As you said I have no right to judge either one of them. But no matter what, you are all your father has left in the world."

Meg wanted to grab those broad shoulders and drag him over to her side of this battle. This was Alec. Her Alec. There was a time when she had always been able to depend on his support and friendship. There was a time when all he had lacked was the shining armor and white charger. There was a time when she had believed in all the nonsense of happily ever after. "There is only one reason Father is interested in me now. And it has nothing to do with affection and everything to do with his desire to control me."

Alec shook his head. "You're mistaken."

Meg caught herself looking at his lips, those generous lips that had tasted so lovely. She really shouldn't be alone with him. He made her think of far too many reckless notions. Even anger had no sword sharp enough to slice this attraction from her heart. "Please take me back to London, Alec. My mother needs me more than Father ever did."

He set his jaw, his lips pulling into a tight line. For an instant she thought he might acquiesce. But the slight shake of his head told her he had waged a battle and she was on the losing side. "I cannot take you back."

"Mother is grieving. She hardly eats. She seldom leaves her chamber. I'm worried about her. She needs me."

Alec hesitated a moment before he spoke, his eyes reflecting the turmoil her words had evoked. "I gave your father my word I would bring you home."

Meg fixed him in a gaze she hoped conveyed all of her displeasure and none of the other more dangerous things he made her feel. "I wouldn't expect you to understand how difficult this is for my mother, how much she is grieving. You're a Highlander. There is a stone where your heart should be."

Alec leaned back against the seat his gaze never leaving hers, pinning her in a way that instantly made her regret

the careless words. After a moment he smiled. "Indeed, how could I understand grief?"

His parents had died last year of fever. They had been in the East Indies, on a trip to meet with their stewards and see the plantations they owned. His brother Elliot had died before Alec had returned from Brussels. Alec had nearly died. He had watched many of his friends die, including her brother, his closest friend. The man sitting across from her was well acquainted with grief.

"I'm sorry, Alec." Heat crept upward along her neck, until her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "I know how close you were to your brother and your parents. I cannot even imagine what the war cost you. Please know, I regret my words."

"I understand." Alec inclined his head. "Anger has a way of making us regret our words."

"Mother is taking the loss of my brothers quite hard. And I'm worried about her."

"I would be surprised if a mother didn't grieve the loss of her sons. A family should stay together, even when it's difficult. We're only given a short time on this earth." Alec paused, allowing her to see in his eyes how very much he believed in his words. "While we're here we need to keep the people we love close. We need to treat them as though we could lose them tomorrow, because we could. In this time of loss, you and your family should be together. And your family includes your father."

*Family.* Meg tried to push aside the pain that came with longing. Yet it hurt to think of everything they had lost. In spite of her effort, tears pricked her eyes. Meg tried not to blink, tried not to allow the tears to gather and fall. "Father stopped caring a long time ago."

"Your father loves you." Alec leaned forward and rested his hand on her upper arm, the warmth of his palm soaking through her dressing-gown and night rail. "He might not be good at showing it, but he loves you. And he wants to protect you."

She wished he would pull her off of the seat and into his arms. The need shocked her and frightened her more than she cared to admit. She was not a foolish girl any longer. All her illusions of romance had died a slow and agonizing death. Yet Alec had dredged all the old feelings from the carefully sealed chest deep within her, that place where she had tucked away all the tender, foolish notions of her youth. "Kidnapping me is hardly the way to go about protecting me."

He squeezed her arm with gentle pressure. For a man as tall and powerful as Alec, he had an incredibly gentle touch. "You left your father little choice."

*You were my friend,* she wanted to shout. Alec had meant the world to her. And here he was, fighting against her. Couldn't he realize how horrible a betrayal this was? "Father doesn't have the right to kidnap me. And here you are, doing his bidding."

"Confound it, Meg." He sat back, depriving her of the warmth of his hand. Still, the warm imprint of his skin simmered where he had touched her. "Someone has to save you from the biggest mistake of your life. You were going to accept Blandford. Perhaps elope with him. I can only imagine it was to get some measure of revenge on your father. You didn't even consider what it would do to you."

Meg clenched her jaw, insulted with his assumption. Perhaps they hadn't seen each other in nine years, but that didn't give Alec an excuse to think her foolish enough to ruin her life. "Apparently my father doesn't know me at all. And neither do you."

Alec's expression altered, the way a wolf might change with the scent of prey. He looked at her as though he intended to peel away all of the layers she had built up over the years, all the defenses that kept her safe, until he could poke at the vulnerable girl hidden deep inside of her. "Tell me what I've got wrong, Meg."

Meg held his gaze, feeling as though he could read her every thought. And in that moment she wanted desperately for him to believe in her. It was easy to remember when they were friends, when just being near him could make her smile. It was difficult to think of him as the enemy. "I'm not a foolish hen-witted girl. I would never marry out of spite. I have a great deal more sense than Father seems to believe."

"If you believe Blandford would make you a proper husband, you're mistaken." Alec leaned forward, so close she could catch the scent of soap rising with the heat of his skin. "Blandford is not the right man for you," he said softly, his voice incredibly deep and smooth.

She caught herself leaning toward him, seeking a deeper taste of that scent, drawn to him in ways she had never suspected existed. She looked him straight in the eyes and willed him to take her side in this war. "If I promise I will make no decisions about marriage until Father has a chance to speak with me in London, will you take me back?"

His lips pulled into a tight line. "Meg I..."

"I swear to you, I will not accept anyone if Father will only come to London and discuss the matter with me. I give you my word I will not run off and marry Blandford."

Alec considered her words a moment before he spoke. "Your father tried to discuss the matter with you in London, and you told him to go to blazes."

Meg choked the groan rising inside of her when it reached her throat. "Father ordered me. He demanded I

return home. How in the world did you suppose I would react? I said things I didn't mean that day."

"Your father is not good with minding his temper. And neither are you."

Meg huffed loudly. "I am quite capable of maintaining my composure."

Alec didn't look convinced. "I'm sorry, but I gave my word. I promised to bring you home. And I will."

Alec had always been her hero, her ideal, the man no one else could eclipse. It was hard when heroes fell from grace. "You're just like Father. You and your kind live in a different century. A time when men painted their faces blue and thought it was fine to run about pillaging the next village."

Instead of looking abashed as any decent gentleman ought to look after receiving such a well-deserved set down, he winked at her. "Careful, lass. Some of that wild Scottish blood flows through your veins, along with all the English ice."

"The ice manages to keep me civilized." She only hoped the ice would protect her from the attraction this man held for her. Her affection for him, her need for things better kept at a distance could get her into a great deal of trouble. "You on the other hand should be running around in animal skins and carrying a club while you drag women from their chambers."

He opened his arms. "Unfortunately you don't have the good sense to return to your home on your own. I'm afraid the years you've spent in England have muddled your brain. Good lord, you don't even sound Scottish any longer."

"It took time." Meg smiled her sweetest. "But, I'm pleased you noticed the improvement."

"An improvement is it?" Alec subjected her to a lazy perusal that managed to kick her heart into a gallop. It was as though he touched her physically with that gaze, as though he slid his warm hands over her skin and did all manner of scandalous things, all the marvelous mischief she could see in those beautiful eyes. "Why did you think you needed to change?"

The reasons she needed to change had been clear that first year in England. Meg tensed as she recalled the rumors that had surrounded her during her first Season. The *ton* had expected her to be coarse and vulgar. They had expected her speech to be barely recognizable. She knew several had been disappointed when she had managed to get through her first ball without knocking over the punch bowl. And she suspected more than a few members of the *ton* had expected her to dance barefooted.

There was no way she could make Alec understand how uneasy she had felt that first year in London, how alone and out of place. It had been important to adapt, and she had done it well. "I wouldn't expect you to understand the importance of proper behavior."

Alec shook his head. "I remember when you were as untamed and glorious as a spirited thoroughbred. What's happened to you? It's as if someone has broken you, told you it's wrong to run, convinced you to walk sedately through life."

Meg sat back, feeling the sting of his words as sharply as an open hand across her cheek. It shouldn't matter if he found fault with her. Yet it did. Foolish girl. It did. "Fortunately I'm not living my life to please you."

Alec regarded her in a manner that made her fear he could look through her walls straight into her deepest secrets. "Who is it you are trying to please?"

He would never understand, so there was no reason to try to explain anything to him. "I'm happy with my life the way it is. And if you don't like me the way I am, then it's really of no significance to me." And if she kept telling herself that lie, perhaps she would believe it.

"I never said I didn't like you, Meg. It's because I like you that I want to see you enjoy yourself. Life is fleeting, too short to waste on being unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy." Meg shifted on her seat, feeling as uncomfortable as a thief facing a magistrate. She should not care what he thought of her. Yet poor besotted fool that she was, she did care. "I'm quite pleased with my life. I have good friends, and there is always something to do in London—museums, shops, and parties. I often ride in the park, or walk. I assure you, I like my life as it is."

Alec studied her a moment, a lazy smile curving his lips. "There was a time when you liked me."

Seeing that smile again was cause for mutiny against all of her best intentions to resist him. Still, she would not allow him to make a fool of her. "There was a time when I wore my hair in braids."

"From what I gathered in your bedchamber, I thought you might still like me a wee bit."

Meg's spine suddenly turned into an iron rod. The man went too far. How dare he toss her foolishness back into her face? "You thought wrong."

Alec studied her, as though he was looking for something in her eyes, something he was afraid he might not find there. "I know this isn't exactly a fine beginning, but I hope we can be friends again."

*Friends.* He had always only wanted to be a friend to her, while she had wanted so much more. It was lowering to face the truth when she had avoided it for too many years. "I don't believe we can ever be friends. It's not my custom to make friends with vile, deceiving..."

Alec held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Perhaps we can discuss this again when you are in a better mood."

A scar sliced a diagonal path across his left palm. The slender white ribbon of flesh trailed along the side of his wrist, disappearing into the cuff of his white shirt. In spite of her best intentions, she caught herself wanting to touch him, to trace the paths of his scars with her fingertips, to assure herself he was well and truly healed. She really had to stop thinking of him this way. This virulent attraction would only destroy her in the end. "I assure you, I have no intention of becoming friends with anyone who believes forcing me in this manner is in any way appropriate."

"All things in time." He pressed his hand to his heart. "I'll keep my hope of changing your mind, lass."

A sensible woman would despise this man. Unfortunately, Alec MacLaren could melt her sensibilities to mush. With a silent oath Meg tried to crush the tender feelings Alec evoked within her. He was everything she detested in a man. Arrogant. Overbearing. Domineering. A woman would be a fool to trust one of his breed. Any woman who gave one of the barbarians her heart could expect it to be broken into a thousand pieces. Unfortunately she had given her heart to Alec a long time ago, and she didn't know how to reclaim it.

She slipped behind a regal façade, hoping to maintain a proper distance. "Since you arranged to kidnap me from my bedchamber, I suppose it's too much to hope you brought some clothes along for me."

Alec had the audacity to grin at her. "I was willing to let you pack, but since you insisted on doing this your way, I didn't bring any clothes for you."

"I would hardly call being tossed over a barbarian's shoulder and kidnapped from my house *my way* of doing things."

Alec shrugged, seemingly immune to her barbs. "I suppose we shall have to make do. You can borrow some of my clothes. As I recall you were always running about in Colin's breeches."

"When I was a child." Meg stared at the man, wondering if he was serious. "How in the world do you expect me to enter a posting inn dressed in your clothes?"

"Ah well, if that is all you are worried about, you need not."

Meg frowned, an uneasy sensation gripping her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"Since we won't be staying at any inns, there is no worry of anyone seeing you, no matter how you are dressed." His grin turned devilish. "Except me, of course."

Even though the seats were well padded and the big coach rocked gently on well-oiled springs, Meg knew how uncomfortable traveling would become in a matter of hours. "You cannot mean to drive straight through to Penross House?"

"We'll travel as the mail travels. We'll stop to change horses of course, and for other necessities. But I'm afraid we cannot stay overnight." Alec rubbed his thumb over his knee, glancing down as he spoke. "Under the circumstances, I think it's the best course of action."

"You mean you're afraid your prisoner will escape?"

He glanced up at her. "I was thinking more of your reputation."

"Now you're worried about my reputation." Meg sat back, hitting the padded seat with a soft thump. A fine trembling gripped her limbs when she thought of her situation. If anyone knew, her reputation would be shattered. "Father should have arranged a proper chaperon for this little adventure."

Alec leaned forward and took her hand in his warm grasp. "Don't worry, Meg. I'll make certain no one sees you. You're safe with me."

Ladies did not hold the hands of gentlemen, especially when neither of them wore gloves. The sensation of having his hand naked upon hers was something of a revelation. There was such comfort in his touch, that gentle embrace of his hand, such concern in his dark voice. It was so tempting to keep her hand warm and secure in his hold. So tempting to rest her head against his chest. Alec MacLaren was nothing if not tempting.

She pulled her hand from his grasp, her fingertips brushing callouses near the base of his fingers. "Please forgive me if I find your reassurances less than comforting. My mother and grandmother will be frantic with worry when they discover I'm missing."

"I arranged to have a note delivered to your mother tomorrow morning."

Meg managed a smile, hoping for some measure of dignity. "I'm certain a note from a kidnapper will put her mind at ease. Mother has suffered a great deal in the past few weeks. And you intend to make her suffer more."

"In my note I told her you were safe with me and I was escorting you home." Alec rubbed his fingertips together, drawing her attention to his hands, those large warm hands. "Your mother knows me. She knows I would never harm you."

"My mother and grandmother will not allow this to pass, MacLaren. They will send someone after me."

Alec grinned, looking pleased. "I'm hoping your mother decides to come after you herself. It's about time she became reacquainted with her husband."

Did he actually have the same aim as her grandmother? "You honestly believe my parents can reconcile?"

“Your father still loves your mother.” Alec held her gaze, allowing her to see the conviction of his belief in his eyes. “If your mother found her way back to your father, would it be so terrible?”

Meg turned away from his penetrating gaze, hoping Alec couldn't see the pain his careless words had caused. The coach had made its way out of the confines of London. Beyond the window glass, silvery light rippled across the trees lining the road, splashing deep into the heart of darkness. The steady rumble of horseshoes and carriage wheels on the macadamized road filtered into the quiet compartment. She was aware of Alec watching her, quietly waiting for a response.

“I doubt my mother and father will ever find their way back to one another. Not after everything that happened.”

“If you could see how much your father misses her, you wouldn't doubt his love for her.”

Meg resisted the urge to argue with him. No matter how much she wanted Alec to understand, no matter how much she wished he was on her side, she knew there was no sense in discussing her father's betrayal with the stubborn male. She turned down the lamp on her side, taking what little privacy the shadows offered, trying to ignore the compelling male sitting across from her.

\*\*\*

Alec leaned back against the black velvet cushions, watching Meg fidget on the squabs across from him in her attempt to get comfortable. The air was chilly, but not nearly as cold as the lady. Still, he had glimpsed something in her eyes when she had spoken of her father, a pain she couldn't disguise. He only hoped Robert could find a way to earn Meg's trust. It was the only way Robert would ever manage to piece together his family.

He pulled a carriage rug in the MacLaren tartan from the narrow compartment behind his seat and tossed it over her knees. “You might need this.”

Meg tossed him a chilly look. “How thoughtful of you.”

He smiled, hoping to melt a wee bit of the ice. “My pleasure.”

She turned her head on the padded back, dismissing him without a word.

Alec reached up and turned down the coach lamp, moonlight filling up the space as the flame died. He supposed he couldn't blame her for holding him in some measure of contempt. He had kidnapped her. He had also neglected to visit her in the past nine years. Yet, he had never forgotten her. Meg was not a lass a man could ever forget.

While he lay near death in Brussels, he had made plans to visit Meg. He wanted to give his condolences for Colin. He knew Meg had remained close to both of her brothers as well as his own family. Yet Alec hadn't expected to return home to find his brother dead and Dunleith in turmoil. Since the ministry had declared him legally dead, upon his brother's death Dunleith and the other estates had gone to the next in line—his cousin Blandford.

Alec wondered how he might mend his bridges with the lovely lady. Unfortunately, his experience with gently bred maidens was limited. His years in the army had given him a great deal of experience with ladies of a more worldly nature: handsome widows looking for excitement, opera singers looking for sport, pretty whores looking for gold.

Over the years he had learned to charm women. He liked women. They liked him. It was simple. Still, he hadn't exactly impressed Meg. Perhaps he should have spent more time in London gaining experience with her species.

Alec had never appreciated the allure of the Season—members of the *haute ton* flitting from one glittering ball to the next, like butterflies trying to sample every flower in a crowded garden. Aggressive mamas shoving shivering chits into the paths of eligible bachelors. Dandies preening like cocks in a barnyard. The entire whirl didn't appeal to him. Now he acknowledged some regret that he had never gone to visit Meg. His reasons had seemed sound each time he had decided against going to see her.

Alec had felt certain Meg's infatuation would die a timely death. One Season in London would erase him from her memory. Often Colin would speak with pride of his sister. *Prinny declared her a diamond of the first water. You should see the men line up, hoping to get a word with her, delivering glasses of lemonade to her, begging for a dance with her. You would laugh knowing wee Meg has London at her feet.* Alec had suspected Meg would be difficult to resist should he see her again, and he had no desire to have his heart tied into a knot by any woman.

Alec and Meg had always shared a keen friendship. He had kept her memory tucked safely away for those moments when he needed to escape the ugliness of war, when he lost himself in thoughts of home. Avoiding Meg had seemed the best way to avoid a complication he couldn't afford in more ways than one.

After choosing to enter the Army, Alec had always acknowledged his life expectancy was tenuous at best. Although many officers dragged their wives with them to the battlefields, he had never possessed a desire to count himself among their number. The thought of his wife mopping up his wounds left him cold. And leaving his wife for months at a time hadn't held any appeal at all. It wasn't a decent life for a woman, certainly not a woman such as Meg—a beautiful heiress with her pick of gentlemen. No, he always knew marriage would have to wait until he had made his own way in the world.

Meg shifted, propping her head against the side of the coach, as she tried to find a comfortable position.

“If you'd like, you can use my shoulder as a pillow.”

Meg pinned him with a look he suspected had sent many men scurrying with their tales tucked between their



legs. "It's hardly a proper suggestion."

Alec smiled beneath her indignant glare. It might not be proper, it certainly wasn't wise, but he kept thinking of how good she had felt in his arms. Although he tried to divert his thoughts, he kept wondering how her skin would feel against his, her long bare legs tangled with his, her breasts soft against his chest. Blood surged low in his belly catching him by surprise.

He hadn't been this quick with a trigger since he was a green boy. No, it definitely was not wise to hold her again. Yet he could manage to allow her the use of his shoulder without making a fool of himself. "If you manage to look past your slavish devotion to propriety, the shoulder will still be here for you."

She pursed her lips. "I don't want anything you have to offer."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "How do you know until you've sampled what I'm offering?"

She huffed softly. "I assure you, the less we have to do with one another for the next few days the better I shall like it."

"And here I thought we could spend the next few days getting to know each other again."

"Since you saw no reason to renew our acquaintance over the past nine years, I see no reason why we should renew it now."

Had Meg guarded a small amount of affection for him all of these years? Alec decided to tease her, to see if he could break through all that haughty indignation. "I never realized you were waiting for me all these years, until this evening."

Meg straightened, popping away from the seat back as though she was a marionette and he had tugged on her strings. "I certainly have not been waiting for you."

Did the lady protest a wee bit too much? "And here I was, thinking you had forgotten all about me. If I had known you were still in love with me, I would have—"

"Don't be ridiculous." Even in this light he could see the blush rise in her cheeks. "I've certainly not been coddling some misguided infatuation for you."

He pressed his hand to his heart. "To know one of the fairest ladies in all of England was waiting—"

The carriage rug smacked his face. When the soft wool tumbled to his lap he smiled at her. "It's good to see some fire still survives beneath all the ice you've grown since coming to England."

Meg issued a low sound in her throat. "It's typical of a barbarian to enjoy the base emotions."

And he was guilty of contemplating most of those base emotions since the first time he had glimpsed her standing in the moonlight. Unfortunately, he was in no position to act upon the emotions she inflicted upon him. At least not yet. He offered her the carriage robe and indulged in a wee bit of teasing. "You will find lass, there are one or two of the base emotions that can prove quite enjoyable."

Meg snatched the robe. "I don't plan to stay in Scotland long enough to discover any of them."

Alec leaned back, watching her flick the dark plaid over her legs, spreading squares of sapphire blue and emerald linked by ruby and gold bars. Being with her again brought back a treasure full of memories, of days spent roaming the hills and valleys near his home, climbing trees, fishing, playing soldiers in an old fort, just lying about looking at the clouds and dreaming. Meg was there—her laughter, her carefree spirit—running about in all of those lovely memories. "Do you remember how sweet and fresh the Highland air is after a rain?"

Meg lowered her gaze, hiding the expression in her eyes. "I've been gone a long time."

"Wait until you see the sun touch the summit of the mountains and spill gold down the slopes of heather. Until you taste a sweet mountain spring. Your memory cannot do the Highlands justice."

"It's a beautiful place." She looked at him, her lips tipping into a stiff smile. "Pity it's filled with men such as you."

"You're a stubborn woman, Margaret Drummond."

She lifted one brown eyebrow, a smug look entering her eyes. "I suppose I haven't been able to purge all of the Highlands from my blood."

He laughed softly, feeling more alive than he had in a long time. Somehow sparring with this woman dragged him from what might be a deep pit of regret and despair at the knowledge his family was gone, and the ghosts of battle that still haunted him. Instead she made him think of things worth a fight. "I'm hoping there is more than just your stubborn streak left, Meg. I'm thinking there just might be a fine fiery nature hidden beneath all the English ice."

She glanced out the window, her chin tipped at a determined angle. "I don't plan to stay around long enough for you to find out, MacLaren."

Alec studied her defiant profile, knowing what she would face when they reached Penross House. He could only hope Robert would handle her with a gentle hand. If not, if he met her stubborn nature with his unruly temper, there would be hell to pay. And Alec had an uneasy feeling he would be the one to face the devil with his due.

He leaned back against the padded seat and closed his eyes, hoping the soft rocking of the coach might lull him to sleep. Yet time and time again he caught himself looking at her, watching Meg, craving the sight of her in a way he

had never experienced before.

Slowly the tension eased from her face as sleep wrapped comforting arms around her. Thick dark lashes lay against cheeks that seemed polished marble in the pale light filtering into the coach. Her lips parted in a teasing manner, those soft, sweet lips. For an innocent maid, she certainly had responded with a heat that had seared him and left him wanting more.

He watched her sleep for a long time, wishing she would allow him to shield her from the bumps of the road and the chill of the night. He wanted to hold her, to breathe her fragrance into his lungs, to feel the sleepy weight of her in his arms, to absorb the warmth of her, that elusive flame hidden beneath her frosty mantle. Yet he needed to keep his distance. Her anger would serve them both well on this journey.

One taste of her had left him with a powerful hunger, as though she were a drug and he addicted with one dose. He didn't trust himself to take another sip from those sweet lips. At least not while she was under his protection.

Even though he intended to do his best to help, he wondered if there was a chance Meg would soften toward her father. If she refused to change her mind about marriage to Blandford, Alec would soon be faced with his own decision. One he wasn't anxious to make. The stakes were far too high to make the wrong move.